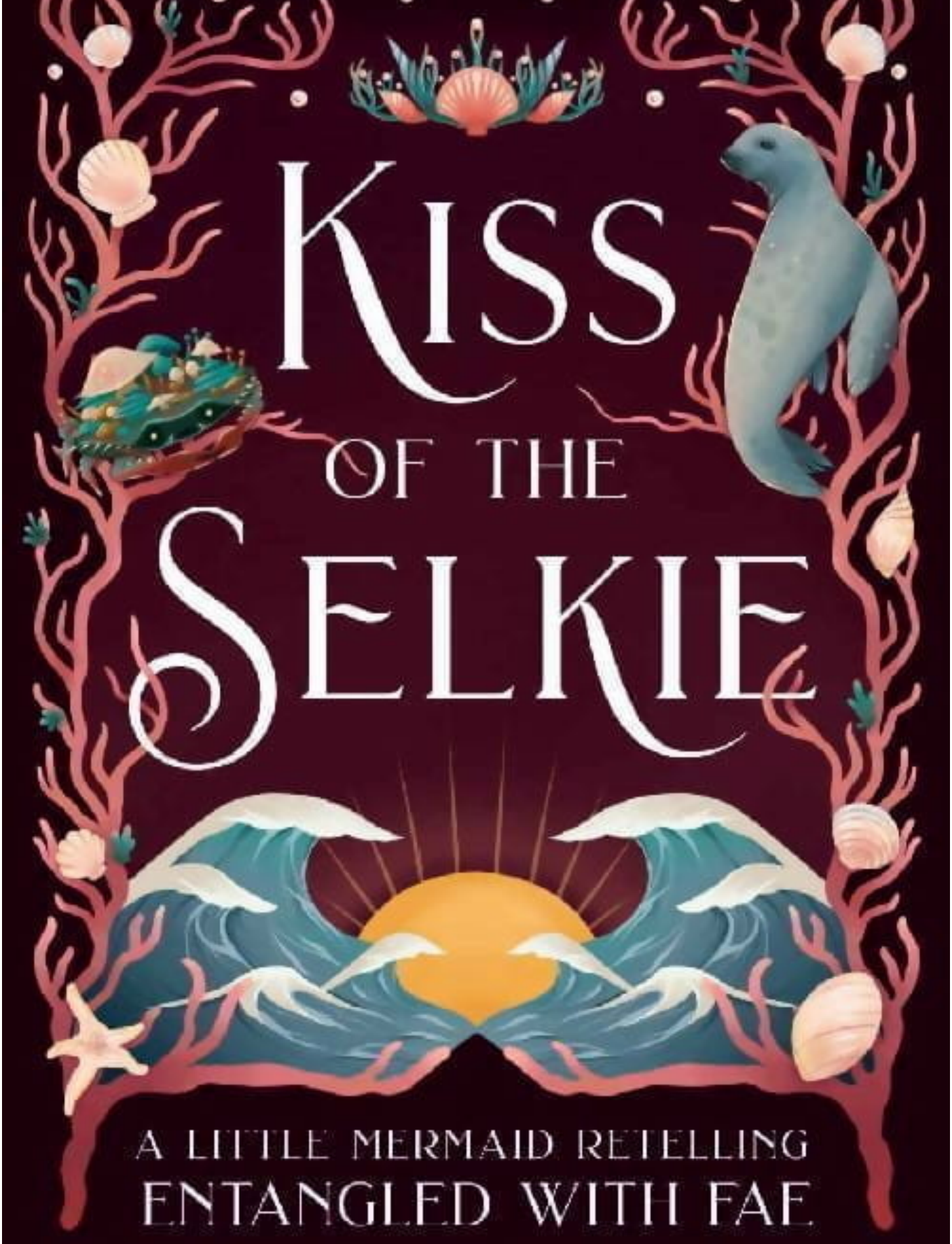
TESSONJA ODETTE



KISS OF THE SELKIE

A LITTLE MERMAID RETELLING

ENTANGLED WITH FAE

KISS OF THE SELKIE

TESSONJA ODETTE

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Free Fae Prequel Story
Also by Tessonja Odette
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LUNAR
STAR
FIRE
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SPRING
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WINTER
SOLAR
EARTHEN
SUMMER
BRETTON

1

I killed the first boy I kissed, and if I ever press my lips to another's, he won't be the last. And I do very much hope he's the last. Not because I dislike kissing. Had it been with someone I tolerated a little more, I could have enjoyed the kiss. That is, if he hadn't stumbled back from me in the middle of it, choking on the taste of my lips.

Kissing is fine. It's the killing I'm not so fond of.

Regardless of what I do and don't like, the truth remains that there are very few options on the Isle of Faerwyvae for a killer like me. The first, of course, is prison. Since I'm fae—a selkie—that could mean an immortal lifetime in a cage. The second option is exile from the isle. That wouldn't be too terrible if it didn't mean death as well. Any fae who leaves the protective magical barrier surrounding the isle for an extended period forfeits their lengthy lifespan. Then there's the third option. Punishment. Since the isle of Faerwyvae is ruled by the fae, lawbreakers are punished according to our ancient ways. Primarily through horrendous, bone-chilling bargains and curses.

Admittedly, as a runaway princess, there's a good chance I'd escape the worst form of these punishments thanks to my father's influence as Seelie King of the Sea Court.

But there's a fourth option reserved just for me. A secret demise worse than all the first three combined. One that has sent me on the run for over a year…

Which, of course, leads me to option five. My favorite.

It's called *hide forever*.

And where better to hide than the bright, boisterous city of Lumenas?

Hands in the pockets of my brown tweed coat, I stroll down the busy downtown city streets, jostled by distracted passersby. No one looks my way, for there are far more interesting things to ogle than a pink-haired fae girl wearing an oversized cap and men's trousers. With my pointed ears—a feature only pureblood fae have—hidden beneath my cap, I could even pass for human if one didn't look too hard. But if anyone did notice, it wouldn't matter, for Lumenas is home to humans and fae in equal measure.

I turn down Halley Street, where the sidewalk is nearly packed end-to-end with tourists. The street crawls with pedestrians, coaches, and even an automobile or two. Sound blares from all around—horse hooves, horns, music, and laughter. After living here for a year, I'm used to it, but I remember how shocking it had been at first. I thought my head would explode from the noise, and it made me miss my quiet little lagoon back home. Now the chaos is nothing more than a colorful backdrop.

Best of all, it aids me in my line of work.

A human couple stops a few feet in front of me, entranced as they stare up at a sky-high building made of pink marble covered in iridescent electric bulbs. Lumenas is the type of city that is even brighter at night than it is during the day. It's half past midnight and the sky is black, but the street is lit up brighter than the sun. I couldn't see the stars right now if I tried. A strange contradiction for a city located in the Star Court—one of the eleven fae courts that comprise Faerwyvae.

"Excuse me," I mutter, pretending to stumble as my shoulder comes up against the man's. He neither acknowledges me nor the hand that slips from my pocket into his, coming away with a brass pocket watch.

Too easy, I think with a smirk as I drop the watch into my satchel. I feel movement from within the bag, followed by a muffled male voice. "That's a nice one, Maisie."

"Podaxis," I hiss from a corner of my mouth, "how many times must I remind you? You can't say that name anymore. It's Pearl, remember?"

My satchel moves again as a pair of red pincers lifts the top flap. Although I can't see his beady eyes hidden in the depths of my bag, I can imagine the worried look on Podaxis' crab-like face. "Yes. Sorry, Your Highness. I mean, Pearl. You know it's hard for me to use that name. It's like lying."

“It’s not lying,” I say, although it sort of is. Full-blood fae, like me and Podaxis, are incapable of stating any direct lie. We can, however, bend the truth quite a bit. It’s all about intent. “My name means *pearl*. That’s true enough.”

“I know, I know,” he mutters, then closes the flap again.

If I were anywhere else, I’d be worried about someone spotting me talking to my bag. But not here. Not when there are so many far more exciting things to look at no matter where you turn—winged men juggling everything from bunnies to knives, musicians pounding drums and bowing fiddles upon makeshift stages, beautiful nymphs dangling from lampposts, performing acrobatic feats on silk ropes. And that’s just this block alone.

At the northern tip of the Star Court, Lumenas is widely known as the musical capital of Faerwyvae, home to more music halls, opera houses, and theaters than anywhere else on the isle. But it has also collected several less savory monikers. Den of Debauchery. Gambler’s Ruin. Devil’s Delight. Thief’s Paradise. At the end of the day, Lumenas is a city teeming with wealthy humans on holiday. They may be drawn in by the beauty and the art, but they stay for the thrill.

Meanwhile, I stay for the subterfuge. The perfect place to hide, where a princess can shed her identity and never be found. Here, I’m just a grain of sand on the seashore. Invisible. Inconsequential. Just a girl dressed as a boy, lifting trinkets from pockets as smoothly as the girls in the Orchid Garden lift their skirts.

I scan the crowds until my attention narrows on a group of humans clustered around an antlered fae male spouting poetry on the corner. He’s dressed in nothing but a ruffled pink skirt and red suspenders, revealing a barrel chest and thick, sculpted calves that have several human females in his audience swooning. Their husbands seem torn between watching their smitten wives or the fae that’s stolen their attention, making them the perfect target. I weave through the crowd and come up behind one man, jabbing my elbow into his side. He surges away, bumping the man next to him. The second man stumbles and rounds on the first with a scowl and a curse. At that moment, I skirt around to the other side of the second man and extract a velvet money pouch from his coat pocket. In its place, I leave a book of matches.

Easy.

By the time I reach the corner of Halley Street and Third, I've added a necklace, a bracelet, and a ruby earring to my satchel. If my bag wasn't already so heavy with Podaxis inside, it certainly is now. I'm about to turn down Third, ready to call it quits for the night, when something catches my eye back on Halley. A group of well-dressed aristocrats linger outside the doors of the Diamonde Opera House, laughing and chatting next to a coach-and-four. The men wear their finest frock coats, top hats, and silk cravats, while the woman nearest me boasts a close-fitting black evening gown, white gloves, and a dainty beaded purse on her wrist. But that's not what has my attention. It's the hair ornament she wears at the back of her head, just below a cluster of neatly pinned curls. It's a comb shaped like a seashell, silver inlaid with iridescent mother-of-pearl. My nose twitches at the sight of it, a sensation much like the precursor to a sneeze. It's the same thing that always happens when I spot any particularly tempting piece of treasure.

My bag shifts as Podaxis shuffles the flap aside. This time, he peers over the top. "Don't do it, Mais—Pearl. You know what happens on this side of Third."

"I know," I mutter without taking my eyes off the comb. He's right. East of Third Avenue, Halley Street hosts far more prestigious clientele than the artful chaos on the west side. Here, the streets are far less busy, the sounds coming from the theaters softer and more melodious, which adds up to higher chances of getting caught stealing. Not to mention the city jail is a block east of here.

"We have enough for tonight," Podaxis says, a plea in his voice. "More importantly, I'd rather we didn't go back to jail."

"That was one time and only for what, fifteen minutes?" I release a sigh. "I really want that comb."

"Why do I even bother?" His voice dissolves into a grumble as he sinks back into the depths of my satchel.

"I don't think so, my friend." I round the corner of the opera house and pause to open my bag all the way. Laughing tourists pass by and pay me no heed. I smile down at Podaxis. "I'm going to need your help on this one."

He snaps his pincers. "What if I say no?"

"You won't."

"How do you know?"

I wink. “Because you never do in the end and you’re my best friend. Now, come. It will be easy! You know what to do.”

“You always pull the best-friend card at the most inopportune times.” He sighs, yet despite his protests, he begins to climb out of my satchel. I help him the rest of the way and set him at my feet. With a yelp, he scurries closer to the building and away from the pounding footsteps of those who walk by. He gets a few curious looks, but no one stares too long. Spotting fae creatures on the streets of Lumenas is unremarkable, even though Podaxis isn’t the most common type of fae found in the Star Court. He’s a fungus sprite, the size of a small terrier with a crablike body, red pincers, and a mossy green carapace sprouting numerous oddly shaped mushrooms. His kind tends to dwell in courts that host dark, wet, or warm climates. The Star Court is hospitable enough for him, but its mild weather and entirely average climate rarely draw his kind away from more favorable courts like Lunar, Earthen, and Fire.

“Ready?” I ask.

“No,” he mutters in reply but raises his pincers.

With a deep breath, I tug my cap lower over my forehead, ensuring any errant strands of my short pink hair are tucked safely beneath its brim. Podaxis and I take off, he toward the coach-and-four, I toward the chatting crowd. I lose sight of Podaxis as I brush past the group, keeping to the opposite side closest to the opera house. A whinny sounds, followed by the clatter of horse hooves.

“What is that?” The woman with the hair ornament gasps, and the group turns toward the commotion. The two horses at the fore of the parked coach try to rear up. The woman takes a step back…toward me. With a spin, I reach up and lift the comb from the back of her head and slide it into my pocket.

I nearly chuckle out loud. So easy.

At the back of the coach, Podaxis scurries from underneath it. That’s where we meet. I swoop down to lift him and hazard a glance back at the crowd. They’re still distracted by the startled horses. “You did great,” I whisper, hugging him to my chest. Despite my confidence, I know better than to linger long enough to let him back into my satchel. Not until after we round the next corner on Fourth. Away from the jail looming across the street.

“That was humiliating.”

“But it worked. I told you—”

“My hair comb! George, have you seen it?”

My heart leaps into my throat, but I keep my eyes fixed straight ahead. Fourth Avenue is a mere dozen feet away. After that—

“You there! Boy!” a man’s voice shouts behind me.

“Shells,” I mutter, quickening my pace. But already I hear the slap of fine shoes on the sidewalk.

“Pearl.” Podaxis’ voice raises an octave.

“I know, I know.” My feet are eager to break into a run, but I force myself to stay calm. Act natural. Finally, I turn down Fourth…

And nearly collide with two people rounding the corner at the same time. One glance at their starched mustard-yellow jackets and black bell-shaped helmets marks them as city patrol officers. I lurch back and to the side, almost tripping over my feet. “Watch yourself,” one says with a scoff. He’s fae with brown skin and enormous curling horns on each side of his helmet. The female officer next to him looks like a sylph, with her blue skin and hair. Sylphs might be pretty and slender, but they are known to be masters of the sword. And I see one at her hip.

“Sorry,” I mutter, trying to make my voice sound lower than it really is. Even though the officers are fae like me, I’ll get no favors from them if they look inside my satchel. Or pockets.

The sylph starts to step to the side to let me pass when a voice booms out behind me. “Boy!”

The officers narrow their eyes at me. I glance to the side and see one of the men from the crowd stomping up the sidewalk. Behind him trails the woman I lifted the comb from. Her eyes widen when she sees what’s clasped to my chest. “That’s the creature that startled the horses.”

“I’ll wager fifty citrine chips that the boy is a thief,” the man says.

“Shells,” I curse under my breath and retreat toward the nearest building.

The patrol officers don’t let me get more than two steps before they close in. “Empty your bag and pockets,” the male officer demands as he reaches for me.

I take another step closer to the building.

Then I close my eyes.

And disappear.

2

When I open my eyes, I find the world has turned an unsettling shade of violet. It covers everything, from the officer frozen in place mid-grab to his sylph companion and the two aristocrats, also motionless. Even Podaxis and I are now purple. Stranger yet is how everything—me, my crustacean friend, the people surrounding me, the street, the buildings—has changed. All matter is now composed of swirling, pulsing particles of violet light, constantly in flux despite how still every living being has become. Or nearly still, as each person continues to move almost imperceptibly.

It's always this way when I disappear. And yet I'm still not used to it. Not sure I'll ever be.

I take off toward the building, but instead of running on swift legs the way I intend to, I sort of float from one step to the next. It feels as if I'm wading through dense sand or swimming through muddy water. My moves are fluid, and my feet find solid ground, but my body doesn't react the way it does in the real world. That's because I'm not in the real world.

I'm in the Twelfth Court.

There are eleven courts on the isle of Faerwyvae, each named for a different element, season, or celestial entity. Each court hosts a different climate and terrain to exemplify the court's elemental affinity, and each is ruled by two fae royals—a seelie and unseelie monarch. They rule separately and are each responsible for different aspects of the court. The seelie ruler oversees matters of everyday life, finance, and human-fae relations, while the unseelie ruler advocates for nature and upholds ancient

tradition. But there's a twelfth court, one that has no king, no queen, no division of seelie versus unseelie. In fact, it isn't a true court at all. It's the home of the All of All, the realm where fae magic originates. And, no, it is not normal to pay a casual visit like I'm doing now.

The first time I came to the Twelfth Court was by accident. It was almost a year ago during my early days in the Star Court when I first learned to steal. I got caught lifting a watch and was hauled by a pair of patrol officers to the city jail. After they shoved me and Podaxis into a dark cell in their fae ward, all I could think about was my desperation to shift forms. Most fae can shift, alternating between one's unseelie and seelie forms at will. A fae's unseelie form is their natural body, often animalistic or ethereal in nature, while seelie form is humanoid like the one I wear now. But I'm not like most fae. I'm a selkie—a seal fae. Unlike nearly every other kind of fae, selkies can't simply shift by intention alone. We change into seelie form by removing our sealskins, and we can only return to our unseelie forms by donning our skins again.

I don't know why it must be so complicated for selkies when every other fae shifts with nothing more than a dainty shudder, but here I am, highly inconvenienced at all times. And there I was, thinking I'd ruined my whole *hide forever* plan, wishing I could shift like normal just by touching the magic of the Twelfth Court like everyone else does when they alternate forms. Of course, even if I'd had my sealskin, it wouldn't have done much good. The officers would have soon been back to process me. They'd have forced me to reveal my true identity regardless of what form I wore. That, in turn, would have revealed me to the very person I was trying to evade. However, my desire to shift wasn't because I thought unseelie form would save me. No, it was comfort I sought then. Fur and blubber and everything I once associated with safety. I figured if everything were to go up in flames, I'd at least be comfortable. So I closed my eyes and tried. Really, really tried.

And then I found myself here, in a time without time, a form without form.

I made my escape then like I'm making it now. And about a half dozen times in between, if I'm being honest.

I breathe deeply, and my lungs respond too slow, filling with air that doesn't feel like air. My pulse is all wrong, somehow beating both sluggishly and rapidly at once. I make it to the door of whatever business

my unlucky fate has brought me to, and step through it, not even bothering to open it. There's no need when all matter consists of buzzing particles of light. A quick look around reveals tables and chairs—a restaurant—all made of the same violet molecules. I see no bodily shapes, so the restaurant must be closed. I make my way toward the back of the room, still feeling as if my legs are being restrained by mud. I'm almost to the kitchen when the nearest table catches my eye, adorned with flatware. My gaze locks on four prongs and a long stem. A fork. While I can't see it for more than a silhouette of shifting, buzzing violet light, the scalloped end of the stem is unfamiliar to me. And I'm willing to bet it's silver. If I had a real nose right now, it would tingle. I glance down at Podaxis, still clutched to my chest. Luckily, he's completely unconscious of what's happening, otherwise he'd tell me not to do what I'm about to do.

"I have time," I say in a voice that sounds too flat to be my own. With a slow grin that lags to catch up with my excitement, I make my way to the fork and pocket it.

My stomach lurches and a pressure begins to build behind my eyes.

"Shells," I mutter. Again, my voice sounds wrong in my ears. "I guess I *don't* have time."

Keeping my gaze fixed firmly ahead to avoid further temptations, I leave the dining room and race through the kitchen. And by race I mean crawl. Float. Running that isn't running. Pressure continues to build in my head, tingling through every purple particle that makes up my flesh, blood, and sinew. My momentum starts to slow, and my legs feel too heavy, my feet too thick, but the door is just a few steps away.

The violet light begins to disperse, and more colors start to show through it. The particles grow thicker, their buzzing slower. I reach the door and push against it, finding it far more solid than the first one I walked through. Still, I try, pushing aside molecules that were once the size of pinpricks but are now more like grapefruits. My vision grows blurry just as my hand breaks through the other side. With all my waning strength, I pull myself out, inch by inch, breath by breath.

Finally, I emerge on the other side just as the world returns to normal.

GASPING FOR AIR, I LEAN AGAINST THE WALL NEXT TO THE RESTAURANT door. I can't bring myself to open my eyes, but the quiet combined with the stale rot invading my nostrils suggests I'm in the alley behind the building.

"Oh, for the love of shells," Podaxis says. "You did it again, didn't you? You really ought to refrain."

I clutch him tighter as I sink to the ground, tears streaming down my cheeks in my efforts to catch my breath. "You're the one who insisted we don't go back to jail," I manage to bite out. My throat burns, my voice as weak as my limbs. My body is racked with sudden chills. There's a reason I continue to steal the old-fashioned way instead of utilizing my strange ability to enter the Twelfth Court.

In his silence, I can sense Podaxis' desire to scold me, but instead, he nestles closer, patting my shoulder with his claw.

It takes several minutes before I regain my strength. When I think I'm ready to walk again, I open the flap of my satchel, allowing Podaxis to scurry inside, and then rise to my feet on wobbly legs. I make my way carefully to the mouth of the alley on the opposite side from where I was almost caught. Hopefully, the patrol officers have given up their search for me by now. They're probably still marveling over how I could have disappeared in the blink of an eye. Finding nothing to alarm me on either side of the street, I wait for a group of inebriated young men dressed down to their shirtsleeves to pass before I follow behind, adding a swagger to my step in my attempt to blend in.

After a few blocks, I reach Orion Street and break away from the group. It's quiet here, being so far from the stunning spectacle that is Halley Street. Instead of towering hotels, elegant theaters, and ostentatious street performers, there are unique galleries, obscure wax museums, curios, cafes, and fledgling clubs. Perhaps the most fledgling of all is the Vulture's Prose Theater. Which is also where I call home.

I reach the theater with its telltale chipped black paint marring the façade. At least our sign is new, hanging above the door, stating *Vulture's Prose* in freshly painted red letters to match the red-headed vulture wearing a tutu leaning against the *E* in *Prose*.

I enter and find the main room empty, the stage dark with not a single light left illuminated. The last performance of the night should have ended at ten, and all patrons are long gone, leaving no need to waste precious light. Not that we waste much at all. We rarely even utilize electricity,

favoring the nearly archaic gas lighting instead. While electricity is readily available from the ley lines of fae magic that crisscross the isle, it still costs money to use. According to Mr. Tuttle, manager of the Vulture's Prose, the theater needs far more vital improvements before electricity becomes a priority. Try to argue, and he'll go on and on about how back in his day, audiences were awed not by tricks of fancy stage lighting but by an actor's stellar performance.

Needless to say, I've learned not to haggle with him over the cost of light.

I'm halfway across the room when sounds of laughter reach my ears. Four figures enter from backstage, and their expressions brighten when they see me.

"Pearl," Martin says with a glowing smile. The blond-haired half-fae boy strolls over to me, hands in his pockets, while the other three—Nadia, Klaus, and Stanley—follow behind. Martin deals cards at a club at the other end of Orion, while the latter three are residents of the Vulture's Prose like I am. Unlike me, however, these three are regular performers at the theater, while I am just the thief that helps fund their artistic ventures.

Martin shifts awkwardly from foot to foot and looks at me from under his lashes. We spent a couple nights together a few weeks back, and he's been acting increasingly attentive ever since—something I try not to feel too flattered about. It wasn't supposed to last. He knows that.

"Greetings, Martin," I say, keeping my tone formal.

He doesn't seem at all put off by my lack of warmth. "We're going out to the Honey House. Care to join us?"

The Honey House is a lesser-known public house that sells one thing. Honey Pyrus. Wine, extract, powder, and several other forms of the hallucinogenic fae fruit can be found there. I feign a yawn. "No, thank you. I think I'll just turn in early. It's been a long night." While I'm feeling much recovered from the aftereffects of entering the Twelfth Court, the night has been long indeed. But aren't they all? Mostly, I just want to avoid doing anything that could give Martin false hope.

His face falls. "Are you sure?" In his eyes, I can see everything he's left unsaid. Everything he wants *me* to say. That he should leave his friends behind and perhaps go to bed early with me.

But I'm not going to say that. I never should have dallied with him in the first place. Romance and lethal kisses do not make a sustainable pair.

“I’m sure. Have a lovely time, though.”

I take a step away, but Martin circles my upper arm with his fingers. His expression turns pleading. “Come on—”

“If she doesn’t want to go, she doesn’t have to,” Nadia says, coming up beside me. She gives Martin a pointed look until he releases my arm. Then she turns toward me with a warm grin. “That doesn’t mean I wouldn’t want you to come. And you too, Podaxis.”

I glance down to see my friend peering from my bag, a subtle glow coming from the normally not-so-glowy mushrooms on his carapace. “Not tonight,” I say, my tone much kinder than it was with Martin.

“Next time,” she says with a wink and heads toward the door. Klaus flings an arm around Stanley’s shoulders and blows me a kiss, while the latter flutters his fingers in a wave. Then the pair follow Nadia. Martin lingers behind. He opens his mouth, but before he can utter a word, I brush past him and make my way backstage. Thankfully, he doesn’t follow. My heart sinks all the same. He and I will need to talk soon, and I’m not looking forward to it.

I find Mr. Tuttle in his office—a room I’m pretty sure was meant to be a mop closet before he filled it with his rickety old desk and crooked filing cabinets. Podaxis climbs from my bag and I set him on the floor. His mushrooms have ceased glowing and are back to their usual pinks, blues, reds, and greens. I’m curious what caused his momentary bout of luminescence, but I’ve got business to attend to.

“What did you bring today, dear Pearl?” Mr. Tuttle says without turning around to look at me. I glance over his shoulder to see him counting citrine chips and rounds—the currency of the Star Court. He’s an older gentleman, perhaps in his seventies, and human too. His wrinkled skin reminds me of an elephant seal, while his sparse gray hair recalls the wind-battered seagulls I used to watch from my lagoon.

“Just a few shiny things,” I say as I empty my satchel onto his desk, spilling out today’s treasures. Altogether there are two pocket watches, three money pouches, a bracelet, a necklace, and two mismatched earrings. Mr. Tuttle pushes his citrine chips aside and retrieves his loupe, bringing it to his eye. Then, one by one, he inspects each piece with his lens, uttering grunts of approval. No gasps of awe this time, for it’s rare that I lift something of supreme value. In our line of work, that’s a good thing. Anything too impressive could draw the wrong kind of attention back to us.

Once he's inspected each piece, he picks up the necklace again. It's a large pendant adorned with tiny amethysts, hanging from a brass chain. "Madame Lillian will like this one," he says with a sideways grin.

I lift a brow. "Oh, I'm sure she will, but don't you dare let her talk you down this time, Mr. Tuttle. You sold her the last necklace for half of what you said you could get for it."

He faces me, and I can almost see the stars in his eyes. "I can't help it, Pearl. She's an enchantress."

I bark a laugh. "She's a charlatan and you know it."

"Then why can't I think straight when she's around?"

"Because she has nice breasts, Mr. Tuttle."

"They're average, in my opinion," Podaxis mutters near my feet.

I swivel toward my friend. "No, they're fantastic." That's no lie. Madame Lillian is endowed fuller than a harp seal's head. What I wouldn't give to have bubbies like that. Or even a fraction of the delectable body fat I have when I'm a seal. But that's beside the point.

Mr. Tuttle sighs. "Fantastic. That they are."

I turn back to the old man with a pointed look. "Now, you better promise me. I'm fae, so I can hold you to it with my wicked magics." I wink to show I'm teasing. Although promises with the fae can be binding indeed, bringing about horrible repercussions if broken, he knows I'm not the bargaining type.

He rolls his eyes with a groan. "Fine. I won't let Madame Lillian buy this necklace for less than…twenty-five citrine chips."

"Fifty."

"Forty."

"Fine. Forty. And that's final."

He scoffs, but his expression is amused. "You're a vicious one, Pearl."

"It's for your own good. Not to mention the good of the Vulture's Prose." He can't argue with the last part. It's Mr. Tuttle's responsibility to sell our so-called *found treasures* to local shops and curios. In turn, he uses the money to fund the theater. Madame Lillian is one of his most regular customers, purchasing our stolen wares and then reselling them to gullible tourists under the guise of *Protection Amulet* or *Enchanted Bracelet That Will Bring True Love*. Ridiculous. And if he keeps letting her take advantage of his infatuation, the Vulture's Prose will never see the marvels of modern electricity.

“Very well, very well.” With a chuckle, he hands me five citrine chips as payment for my night’s work, then shoos me away.

With a skip in my step, I pocket the chips and head deeper backstage.

“To bed then?” Podaxis asks with a little yawn.

“Nope.” I walk past the narrow corridor that leads to the bedrooms and go straight for the back door that opens to the alley. “We’re going out.”

Podaxis taps his pincers together in an anxious gesture, hind claws clacking on the wood floor. “But you said…to Martin...that we were staying in.”

“I meant it then, but I changed my mind.” I open the door to the quiet night and the destination that beckons me beyond. Closing my eyes, I try to imagine I can already hear the sound of waves, feel the spray of salt on my skin. When I open them, I see Podaxis watching me from the shadows of his carapace. “What?”

He releases a grumbling sigh. “For a fae who can’t lie, you are frighteningly good at it.”

3

We reach Cape Vega and find nothing but peaceful isolation. A black sky, a crescent moon, a soft wind. If I don't look behind me where downtown Lumenas shines as bright as a beacon even from a mile away, I can pretend I'm far from civilization. Tourists don't come to Lumenas for the beach, which means the cape is almost always empty. I still don't dare come during the day. Only at night. Only when the moon is but a sliver of light.

I walk to the edge of the bluff that overlooks a wind-tossed ocean and breathe in deep. The air tastes of salt and smells of home. I close my eyes, trying to imagine I'm not here but where I wish I could be—Bircharbor Palace.

Not that I ever spent much time inside the palace itself. Bircharbor is located at the very edge of the Autumn Court, perched upon a tall cliff overlooking the eastern seas of Father's domain. But dry indoor air, stuffy politics, and walking on two legs never had much appeal to me when I was growing up. I preferred life as a seal on the sandy beach below the palace or in my little lagoon at the base of the cliff. Protected by a wall of coral, the lagoon was the perfect place for a young selkie to swim without the dangers of the open ocean. When I wasn't swimming, I was basking on sun-warmed rocks, playing with Podaxis, or nestled against my selkie brothers. Longing twists my heart at the thought.

"Are you certain this is wise, Maisie?"

I open my eyes and blink away thoughts of playful siblings and my crystal-blue lagoon. At least I have Podaxis. Not only is he my best friend,

but he might as well be my brother too, considering we were raised together since we were both quite young. He was orphaned following a shark attack that killed his parents, found by my father, and brought home to be my companion. We took to one another like fish to water and have been inseparable ever since.

He climbs from my bag and I set him on the ground. Since we're alone, I don't bother correcting his use of my real name. "Wise? I don't recall coming here for wisdom."

He looks up at me and taps his pincers anxiously together. "It's just that you really ought not to be this close to the ocean. You know I thought it was a bad idea to come to Lumenas at all, with such close proximity to the sea."

He's right about that. When I first went on the run and came to Lumenas, Podaxis made no secret of his concern. I would have been worried too if I hadn't heard the rumors about the city. Anyone who speaks of it insists it's the ultimate location to disappear to and start new lives. A city of brilliance, beauty, and debauchery. Where opportunities abound for artists, aristocrats, and thieves in equal measure. A place where one can easily get lost in the teeming crowds. Hearing all of this, I decided to take the risk.

And that risk has paid off. I've been living in Lumenas for over a year and not once have I come close to being found by she whom I evade. Aside from that one time in jail, of course. That was a beginner's mistake.

"Podaxis, who should I worry about seeing me?"

"There could be…ruffians around," he says, although I can tell from his tone that he doesn't find it too likely.

"The only ruffians here are you and me." I chuckle, glancing from one side of the beach to the other. The only imposing figures in sight are the towering stones that make up the magical perimeter wall around Faerwyvae. Each stone is at least twice my height and thrice as wide with no more than fifty feet between each stone. They rise from the rocky shore, lining it as far as I can see, standing sentinel against outside threats. Infused with unseen magic, the biggest army in the world couldn't penetrate the invisible wall the stones create, for only one of pure fae blood may pass through it. That's how it's been since the end of the last human-fae war. At least, that's what my father told me. I wasn't alive yet. The war ended about twenty-two years ago and I was born a few years after that. But stories tell how the stones once stood as a divide, separating the human lands in the

south from the fae realm in the north. After Faerwyvae was threatened by a human army that sought to wipe out all life on the isle in order to eliminate faekind, the fae rose against them and triumphed. That's when the stones were moved. Instead of forming a wall that separated two species, they became a protective perimeter, allowing the humans and fae to live unified under fae rule. Now it's impossible for humans to enter or leave the isle without a fae escort, and such things are highly regulated.

For the fae, there's very little appeal beyond the stones, even for a sea fae. The magic of the wall only extends so far out into the ocean, and fae can't thrive without our magic.

When it comes to this side of the stones, well, there isn't much at Cape Vega to entice my kind to linger about. Below the bluff, there's only a sliver of a shore, and it hosts not plush sand but rocks. The boulders peeking from the water's surface are jagged and covered in barnacles. There's hardly a beach for selkies to shed their skins and dance, much less an adequate perch for mermaids and sirens. Here I'm alone in the best sort of way.

I lift my chin and force confidence into my tone. "Queen Nimue won't find me here." I try to pretend saying her name out loud doesn't make me shudder. Perhaps I should have used one of her alternate monikers. Like the city of Lumenas, she's known by many.

Unseelie Queen of the Sea.

Killer Queen.

The Sea Witch.

Father's Great Nemesis.

"If your father was frightened of her, you should be too," Podaxis says. "I can't imagine what could terrify a king in his own ocean. You must be careful."

"I'm quite careful."

"If you say so, Pearl."

With a sigh, I sit, my legs extended slightly over the edge of the bluff. Podaxis takes a more conservative seat close to my hips. Then I take off my hat and let my short pink hair catch the wind. I luxuriate in the caress of the breeze dancing through every strand. After keeping my hair stuffed under a cap all day, it feels as good as a massage. Even though I feel safe in Lumenas, keeping my hair hidden is an easy precaution. Not that candy-floss-pink hair is unusual for a fae. My kind are known to have hair of all shades. But the combination of pink hair, golden-tan complexion, and an

abundant spattering of freckles…well, that's narrowing things down quite a bit. Throw in a girl carrying around her crustacean friend, and I'm as good as caught.

And if I'm caught…

My lungs contract at the thought.

She'll make you a killer, Maisie, Father's voice echoes through my mind. *If Queen Nimue knows you have death magic, she'll hunt you down. She won't stop until she makes you one of her assassins. I can't live with that. You're not a killer, my child. I can't see you made a murderer…*

Clenching my jaw, I force the ruminations away and reach inside my coat pocket. A smile spreads over my lips as I draw out the shell-shaped comb. I run my fingers over the smooth mother-of-pearl, watching the starlight glint off the silver teeth of the comb.

Podaxis taps a claw on the grassy ground, each *thud* brimming with reproach. "I see you didn't sell that to Mr. Tuttle."

"Nope." Ignoring his beady, condemning eyes, I brush one side of my hair behind my ears and pin the comb in place. In an instant, my hair ceases whipping into my eyes. "Cutting my hair was the best choice I ever made."

"You say that often."

"It's always true." I reach into my pocket again, and this time I come away with my newest treasure.

Podaxis gasps at the sight of the stolen fork. "I didn't see you take that! Where did you get it?"

"A restaurant." I run my fingers along each of the four tines, then over the scalloped shell-like design on the handle. Now that I have time to properly study it, I can confirm that it is, indeed, pure silver. My nose twitches as I watch it glimmer even brighter than the hair comb.

"You know, your agreement with Mr. Tuttle states that you're supposed to hand over everything you steal."

"I know our agreement, Podaxis. Technically, we never made a binding promise. I'd like to think of it more as a general suggestion. Besides, I can't wait to add this to my collection." By collection, I mean the hatbox full of silverware I have tucked under my bed at the theater. If only I hadn't had to leave my former collections behind when I went on the run. I had so many pretty things, curated over many years.

"What, pray tell, are you planning on doing with your *collection*? Hmm? I know you aren't going to sell it, although I can only guess it would

be worth enough to either fund a few weeks of performances at the Vulture's Prose or rent us a new place to live."

"I like where we live. I also like to collect shiny objects. That isn't a crime."

"But stealing them is. Keeping them under your bed is just leaving evidence lying around."

I scratch an itch on my scalp with the tines of the fork. "I don't keep everything I find."

"You still steal them."

"No, I sell them," I say. "That's less stealing and more taking one thing from one place, moving it to another, and making a profit. I'm basically a merchant."

Podaxis scoffs. "I honestly can't fathom how you do it."

"How I do what?"

He taps his hind claws on the ground again. "How you lie."

"It's not a lie if I can successfully utter it aloud."

"No, I suppose not. But somehow you are able to convince yourself something is true when it is perhaps only partially so, and in turn, weave untruths into truth. It's maddening."

I wink. "Only because you haven't mastered the art of doing it yourself. It's called talent."

"I'd call it something else," he mutters under his breath.

Silence falls between us, and I think that might be the last of his arguments. Although, knowing Podaxis…

"Why didn't you go out with Martin tonight?" His tone has shifted from condemning to hesitantly curious.

My muscles tense all the same. "Why would I?"

"I thought you liked him."

I roll my eyes. "Hardly."

He shifts awkwardly from claw to claw. "You seemed to like him enough to…you know."

A blush rises to my cheeks as the nights I spent with Martin flood my mind. "What would you know about it? You better not have been listening. I told you to sleep elsewhere." I try to keep my voice neutral, but there's a note of hysteria I can't hide. Podaxis may be my best friend, but we don't talk about…*that*.

“I wasn’t listening,” he rushes to say. Then his expression takes on a dreamy quality, his tiny eyes turning down at the corners. “I stayed in Nadia’s room. Did you know she sings when she’s getting ready for bed? She has a lovely singing voice.”

I can’t help but note the wistfulness in his tone. It’s so pathetic and adorable I have to stifle a laugh. “Wait…do you fancy Nadia?”

He snaps his pincers at me. “So what if I do?”

“Nadia is human, Podaxis. I don’t think her kind thinks too highly of human-crab relations.”

“I don’t—I’m not a crab. I’m a fungus sprite.”

“Still, I think you’ll have to get over your prejudice and take seelie form if you want to impress her.”

“Prejudice! Me? I am not prejudiced. I don’t mind seelie form.”

“Then why haven’t you shifted before?”

He shakes a claw at me. “We’re getting off topic. This is about you, Maisie. You liked Martin. For two weeks, I watched you smile every time he was around. It was nice to see you smile again.”

I shake my head, trying not to remember how nice those two weeks truly were. Not that I felt anything for him. It was more that I enjoyed being so physically close to a man…and the things we did. “He’s too skinny. I like my men with some blubber on their bones.”

“You say that about every boy you try not to let yourself like. Or you say they’re boring. Or that they have the personality of dry kelp.”

“I only said that last one about Prince Franco.” And it was true. Before I decided to go on the run, Father thought the best way to keep me safe from Queen Nimue was to marry me to a royal on land. That’s where Prince Franco of the Lunar Court came in. However, him being a psy vampire and able to read my every mood, every lie…it wasn’t the best arrangement for someone with as many secrets as I have. Even if I had been able to convince him to marry me, what would he have done when he learned my kiss could kill him?

No. Marriage, romance, love…none of that is for me.

Podaxis’ voice softens. “Don’t you want to stop running?”

“I only run when I’m about to get caught by the officers.”

“You know what I mean. I thought we came here to settle down and start a new life.”

I turn my fork over and over in my hands to hide how ruffled I am by his questions. My lungs are growing tighter and tighter the closer he gets to the truth. “Yes, but that doesn’t mean I need to cozy up with every boy who bats his lashes at me.”

“Maisie, your father would want you to be happy—”

Just like that, a crack forms in my carefully curated façade. Right at the center of my heart. “What do you want from me, Podaxis?” My voice breaks on his name. “To admit that I’m *not* happy? That I’m downright sad? That I miss Father and my brothers?”

He shrinks down, eyes wide with apology though he says nothing.

My lower lip trembles. “Do you want me to admit that I’m lonely?”

“You don’t have to be lonely,” Podaxis whispers. “I know I’m not enough—”

“Yes, you are,” I say, wiping furiously at an errant tear.

“No, Maisie, I’m not. We may have grown up together, and we may be best friends, but you need more than just me. You need *other* friends. Maybe even love.”

“You know why I can’t fall in love. Why I shouldn’t have even let things get so far with Martin.” I close my eyes and tip my head back in frustration. It isn’t Podaxis I’m frustrated with but me. I’m the one who invited Martin to my bed. Before I ran away, I hadn’t removed my sealskin more than a handful of times, hardly left the beach I’d spent my entire life on. I was sheltered and didn’t even know it. Then I came here to Lumenas where new experiences and sensations are found on every corner. My eyes were opened to so much I hadn’t known existed. Curious things I never understood as a seal. Things like flirtation and lovemaking for pleasure, not just procreation. A couple weeks ago, I decided I wanted to know what that was like, and Martin was a willing accomplice. Honestly, I was surprised how accommodating he was with my terms of no kissing and no romantic attachments. Even though he succeeded at following the first rule, I could tell when he started breaking the second. He’s been a little too persistent ever since. I’m starting to think he doesn’t know the meaning of the word *no*.

“Why can’t you fall in love? Because you can’t kiss?”

I give Podaxis a firm look. “Yes, because I can’t kiss anyone without killing them. Without snuffing out an innocent life. Again.”

He taps his pincers together, and I can tell he's debating whether he should say more. Then he speaks, his voice barely above a whisper. "Luther was hardly innocent."

Nausea turns my stomach at the name.

"Maisie." Podaxis gently pats my knee. "You didn't mean to kill him."

"It doesn't matter." My voice is raspy. Raw. I rise to my feet and take a step away from my friend. "Loving me is deadly. I can't risk it."

"So is this all you want from the rest of your life? To steal to get by? To keep all other people at claw's length?"

What I want is to live my life in peace without having to worry that Queen Nimue will find me and try to exploit my deadly magic. But I can't bring myself to say that, for it only brings up more questions. More uncomfortable realizations. Primarily the fact that I'm fae and—unless I'm mortally wounded in one of the few ways that can kill my kind—I could live indefinitely.

And so can she who hunts me.

There's a reason I call my plan *hide forever*.

It's only terrifying when you consider just how long forever can be. No wonder Father wanted me to marry a royal on land. If I had, this would all be over. No hiding. No stealing. I would no longer belong to the Sea Court, and Queen Nimue wouldn't dare try to take me from a royal household on land.

But, as I've already come to terms with, marriage wouldn't have worked. Not with me. Not ever.

I stare out at the sea, my eyes unfocused over the glint of moonlight on the water. "I just want to survive."

"You know, there's more to life than—"

"What the jagged clam is that?" I grow tense as I realize my gaze isn't resting on moonlight at all but light of a different kind. One that shouldn't be there. I shutter my eyes, but there's no denying what it is. "Fire."

4

The night is so dark, I can barely make out the tendrils of smoke rising into the sky above the shipwreck. While I can't see the ship from here, I know that's what it is. The fire itself is relatively small, so I doubt the boat is anything larger than a two-masted schooner. Its proximity to shore suggests the ship had been heading in to dock, despite the absence of trade ports nearby. Even though it didn't meet its demise on this side of the wall, it happened near enough that the sea surrounding it holds some of the isle's magic. That means the wreck occurred within fae waters.

Which leaves two possible scenarios. One, the shipwreck was an unfortunate accident. Or, two, it was attacked.

By fae.

If it was attacked, was it done lawfully? If the ship was illegally approaching Faerwyvae, the fae have every right to stop it by any means necessary.

But if it was lured for nefarious purposes…

No, there are several far more likely possibilities. It could be an approved trade vessel that miscalculated its coordinates. A fishing boat that met troubled seas that sent it far from dedicated fishing waters. A damaged schooner seeking safe harbor for repairs.

My stomach sinks. If any of those are the case, it only makes it worse if the ship was attacked. There could be innocents on board.

"It isn't any of your business, Maisie," Podaxis says, his tone full of warning. "We should go. If it's an accident, someone will be coming out to help."

“I know,” I say, but I find myself rooted in place, unable to look away. What if he’s wrong? What if I’m the only one who sees the fire? With Cape Vega jutting out so far from the shore, no one east of Lumenas will be able to see the flames, and there are few coastal towns west of here that would be close enough to notice.

“I know that look in your eyes,” Podaxis says. “You can’t risk it.”

He’s right, but my heart plummets just the same. This isn’t the first shipwreck I’ve witnessed. I saw several from the beach back home. Whenever they occurred in the waters near Bircharbor Palace, my brothers would swim out to help. Sometimes even my father went. It didn’t matter if the sailors were human or fae. As Seelie King of the Sea Court, Father’s duty often involves keeping peace between humans and fae. That includes saving human lives when he can—unlike Nimue, the Unseelie Queen of the Sea, who probably caused a good portion of the wrecks I saw to begin with. There’s a reason she’s called Killer Queen. That’s what Father always said, at least. Regardless, he was tireless when it came to saving people and the work was never done until every survivor was recovered.

But now…no one seems to be coming to this ship’s aid. No one even seems to notice the fire.

No one but me.

As the ship sinks lower and lower, so do my spirits. Soon the fire will consume the ship whole and be doused by the ocean. Nothing but scraps will remain as proof that it was ever here.

And all I can do is stand and stare. Witness death. If I do anything else, I risk getting caught by Nimue. If the ship was attacked by fae, the attackers could still be around. If they see me, recognize me…

Podaxis tugs the hem of my trousers with a claw. “We need to go.”

“Shells,” I curse under my breath. “You’re right. I know.” Clenching my fingers into fists, I harden my resolve and start to turn away, my heart pounding in protest. Just as the now-meager flames leave my periphery, something else catches the corner of my eye. I pause, finding a dark shape moving in the water. Angling myself toward it, I step as close to the edge of the bluff as I dare, straining my eyes to make out what splashes between the waves. But it’s gone. I frown, certain there was something—

Movement again, and this time it’s closer, revealing what appears to be a head and flailing arms. My breath catches. “There’s a person.”

“Where?”

I point, but already the figure is slipping beneath the waves. “They’re drowning.”

“You don’t owe them anything. If they swam this far, they’ll make it to shore on their own.”

He’s only right so long as the survivor is full fae. If they’re human or part fae, they won’t make it through the invisible barrier wall without a fae escort. Even if they are fae, they can still be prone to overexertion. The sea appears relatively calm but considering how far the person is from the wreck, they’ve already swum a long way and are only halfway to shore. More concerning is how long it’s been since they’ve come up for air. Whether human or a fae in seelie form, I doubt they’re likely to survive underwater much longer.

I nibble my lip, waiting to see the figure reappear. The seconds tick by. One. Two. Three. Four.

A head breaches the surface again, but only for a moment this time.

“Shells.” I clench my jaw and shrug off my coat, vest, and shoes, leaving me in nothing but trousers, a shirt, and suspenders.

“Maisie, no!” Podaxis shouts as I begin to climb down the side of the bluff. “You don’t even have your sealskin.”

“I’m an excellent swimmer,” I say as my feet find one rocky outcropping after the next. The truth is, I’ve never tried swimming in my seelie form. Even as a seal I only swam in the open ocean a few times, and I didn’t stray too far from shore. I never aided with Father’s rescues before. There was no need with my much-older brothers around.

An overwhelming sense of inadequacy washes over me, sparking panic. It’s almost enough to give me pause. *Almost*.

But if I do nothing and let this person die…does that make me any better than a killer?

You’re not a killer, my child. I can’t see you made a murderer.

Father would never allow a sailor to drown if he could stop it. While I may not be as good or as honest as he is, he believed in me. Believed I was better than a killer, even after he found out what I’d done…

Tears prick my eyes at the enormity of that faith—a faith that I must honor now, regardless of the risk to me. It gives me the strength to quicken my pace. Podaxis follows in my wake, scuttling down the rocks with far more ease than me. I climb down as fast as I dare until my feet finally meet the sliver of rocky shore. Without a second thought, I dive into the sea.

~

THE WATER INSTANTLY SOAKS MY CLOTHING, BURNING LIKE ICE ON MY SKIN. It's nothing like it felt when I was a seal. With my sealskin, I had layers of comforting blubber to protect against chilled waters, webbed flippers to propel me forward with ease. But now everything feels wrong. My trousers and shirt are too heavy, my limbs too long, too thin, too cold, my seelie body not made for swimming the way my unseelie form is. While the waves seemed gentle from my vantage point on the bluff, now they feel violent, the current abrasive like it could rip me in two. For a terrifying second, I regret every instinct I had to rescue a flailing stranger, for they're about to be the death of me.

No, the ocean will not be the death of me, I tell myself. *I may be in seelie form but I will always be a selkie. And water is a selkie's domain.*

My panic doesn't lessen, but my body manages to calm. I close my eyes and stop fighting the current, focusing instead on the feel of the water against my skin. Not how cold it is. Not how wrong my body feels within it. I try to form a new relationship with my watery surroundings. My arms and legs, while nothing like flippers, still move through it, still meet a similar resistance that I'm used to.

My lungs burn as I struggle to find a rhythm, a motion that will propel me forward and up so I can catch a breath of air. Finally, I find it. My arms cut straight ahead and then stroke down to the side, much like I've seen mermaids do. My back legs mimic a mermaid's tail at first too, rippling and undulating as I move through the sea. However, I find that if I bow my legs outward and kick back, I can gain a much-needed surge of forward momentum. I may lack elegance, but soon I'm cutting through the water with something close to ease.

Just as I think my lungs might collapse within my chest, I breach the surface and take a much-needed gulp of air. Treading water, I glance back at the shore, trying to assess where I am, how far I've gone. The standing stones and the shore beyond them are still easily within view. I seek signs of the shipwreck next. At first, there's nothing. Then a flicker of light that is the dying fire. Judging by where I seem to be in comparison with the shore and fire, I should be close to the drowning sailor. That is, if they haven't drowned already.

Keeping my head above water, I look this way and that, then swim forward a little. Waves crash over my face, obscuring my vision. No matter where I look, there's no sign of the sailor.

My heart sinks. I've failed. I risked my life, my safety, for nothing.

"Help." The voice is deep yet weak, barely audible over the sounds of the ocean. But I hear it. Where is it coming from? I swim farther from shore, looking everywhere, straining my ears above the crash of the waves.

It comes again. "Help." This time it's closer. Clearer.

I swim toward where I heard the plea. Then I see a shape in the water, a head and pair of arms feebly grasping a floating plank of wood. It's a man. Another wave comes, taking him down with it. I dive under and swim toward the sailor. Once I reach where he last was, I swim in a circle, seeking any sign of him in the murky depths below. Soon I'm out of breath again and breach the surface. I glance about, but he's nowhere. Nowhere. I wait. And wait. And listen. Listen. Listen.

Nothing.

"Shells!" I slap the surface of the water. He was just here and now he's gone. That last wave must have taken the remnants of his energy with it. I take a deep breath and dive back down. My eyes burn underwater, my vision dismal. It's nothing like it is when I'm a seal. With my sealskin, I can see clearly. Now, I might as well be blind.

Seconds tick by. I feel helpless, imagining him sinking deeper and deeper, getting farther away from me with every beat of my heart. If only he could just hold still, stay wherever he is…

My pulse quickens as an idea sparks in my mind.

I know a way to freeze time. Sort of.

It's a risk. I rarely enter the Twelfth Court twice in the same day, due to the toll it takes on me, but I've already come so far trying to save the sailor. It's mostly sheer stubbornness that hasn't convinced me to give up already. But I won't give up. Father never did nor did my brothers.

So I close my eyes.

And disappear.

I'VE NEVER ENTERED THE TWELFTH COURT UNDERWATER, SO I'M SURPRISED how similar it is to when I'm on land. The world turns violet. Everything goes still around me aside from the shifting, swirling particles that make up all matter. Within the nearly unmoving ocean, my body takes on a new sense of weightlessness. Where I felt like I was trudging through mud during my escape in the restaurant, I find I can move with slightly more ease and fluidity here. And move I do, pushing particles aside as I swim through water that isn't water, cutting through frozen currents, seeking signs of life. The violet particles that make up living things are always brighter in the Twelfth Court, so I focus on the brightest shades of purple. A fish here, an eel there. Billions of flecks of light sparkle all around but there's nothing as large as a human. I push more and more particles aside, half swimming, half walking through them.

Then my chest starts to grow tight.

Not from lack of air.

From my time in the Twelfth Court coming to an end.

I turn this way and that, moving faster despite how my vision blurs at the edges. He has to be here. Somewhere.

The particles start to grow larger, denser, vibrating slower. Soon time will recommence, and I might not have the strength to fight it.

I have no choice. I must return to the surface.

My heart sinks with defeat as I begin to swim upward, where the particles are still minuscule.

That's when I see it.

The bright violet of a body suspended to my left.

I surge toward it, my lungs burning with every stroke of my arms, every kick of my legs. My vision is nearly black now as the Twelfth Court begins to dissolve around me. My stomach lurches and my throat sears, this time from the need for air too. I reach out blind.

And my hand meets something solid.

Grasping whatever I have—an arm, a leg—I kick up, up, through the last remnants of frozen time. My moves are no longer fast. No longer fluid. But I'm almost there. Almost.

My lips meet air just as the Twelfth Court disappears and leaves me tossed by the sea.

5

I'm only somewhat aware as I make it back to the beach. Each move is agony. My exhaustion from swimming in my seelie form, the aftereffects of the Twelfth Court, dragging the unconscious sailor alongside me—it all compounds, leaving me barely able to do anything but float, aiding my progression with a feeble kick and stroke here and there. It's all that keeps us from heading in a wayward direction and getting dashed into the rocks beneath the bluff.

By some miracle, my feet eventually meet the rocky shore. There I collapse on my back, releasing my charge to fall at my side. I turn away from him, coughing up water and bile. Tears stream down my cheeks as a sob breaks free from my chest.

"Maisie." Podaxis' tremulous voice comes from beside me, but I don't have the strength to open my eyes. "Oh, Your Highness, you shouldn't have done that."

"Maybe not," I manage to croak out. For a few painful minutes, I can do nothing but lie and convulse, catching my breath, gathering some semblance of strength as gentle waves lap over my feet. Anxiety ripples through me as every second ticks by. The tide is going out, so there's no rush to leave the beach. Instead, my panic is over the fate of the man I saved. I must move. Must roll over and make sure he's alive. With a wince, I lift my head. It feels too heavy, but I force myself to turn to my other side.

I blink several times, startled to find him so close. The first thing I notice are his rounded ears, telling me he's at least part human. That doesn't surprise me. I had my doubts from the beginning that the survivor of the

shipwreck could be fae. Very few fae have reason to set sail, even within protected waters. So who is this man I've rescued?

I turn my attention to his face. His eyes are closed, jaw slack, mouth slightly parted. Dread sinks my stomach. "Is he dead?"

Podaxis scurries over to his other side and taps a claw against his shoulder. The man doesn't move. "I don't know," he says, voice panicked. "Should I pinch him?"

"Don't pinch him. I need to check his life force." I try to recall everything I gleaned from the rescues I've witnessed. With my weak limbs, I drag myself closer, draping myself halfway over his chest. I place my fingers at the base of his throat, mimicking what I've seen my brothers do. "Damn it, I don't know if I'm doing this right. I don't feel anything, but maybe my fingers are just too cold."

"I could still pinch him. If he's alive, he'll shout."

Ignoring Podaxis, I lift the man's hand, turning his palm over until I find his wrist. Again, I'm not certain if I'm doing things correctly, but I press my fingers to the crease beneath his palm. I know my brothers tested life force this way, but what did they do if they couldn't find any sign of it?

The answer comes to me quickly as memories flash through my mind.

"The kiss of life," I say under my breath. "I can't give that to him."

"A kiss? Why would you kiss him, Maisie? That's absurd and highly illogical."

"No, Podaxis. Don't you remember? When my brothers rescued unresponsive sailors, they would put their mouths on the sailors' and breathe." I glance at the man's parted lips. "But I can't do that without killing him."

Podaxis taps his claws together. "Maybe we should just leave him."

"No, not yet. There's still more I can do, I'm sure of it." I pull myself to sitting and rub my eyes as if that will help me see a solution. How else did my brothers help drowning men? I replay the last shipwreck I witnessed. It was years ago, but still…

I watch the memory as if through a fog. In it, I see my youngest brother swim out to the wreck in his seal form. Return with a survivor. Remove his sealskin. Check for life force at the sailor's neck and wrist. Give him the kiss of life. Then move his palms to the sailor's chest—

"That's it!" I press my hands to the center of the man's chest and try to imitate the pumping motions I saw my brothers do. I expect his chest to rise

and fall with each move, but he's like solid stone. "This is way harder than it looks."

"Maybe you have to touch his skin."

I can't recall if my brothers removed the shirts of those they rescued, but it's as good of an idea as we've got. "Yes, smart thinking, Podaxis." With trembling fingers, I rush to unbutton his waistcoat. While I can't make out its color in the dark, I'm surprised by the smooth feel of the brocade. It seems this man is more than a simple sailor or fisherman. He might even be an aristocrat. With his waistcoat open, I move on to his shirt. A blush creeps up my cheeks at the dawning realization of what I'm doing. I'm undressing a man. Something I didn't even do for Martin. I swallow hard and shake the thoughts from my head, loosening the final button. Then I spread the fabric out of the way and place my hands over his naked skin.

My breath catches in my throat as they rest against firm muscle. "Oh."

"What is it?" Podaxis shifts from claw to claw.

A corner of my lips flicks up. "Well, now, he isn't too skinny at all."

"I don't think that's blubber on his bones."

"Whatever it is…I think I like it."

"This is no time to ogle, Maisie. He might be dead."

"Ew, you're right." Getting back to business, I attempt the pressing motions again but find them just as ineffective as before. Should I be pressing harder? Are my hands not in the right place? Gritting my teeth, I swing a leg over the man until I'm straddling his hips, then put as much effort as I can into pumping his chest again and again.

"I don't think it's working." Podaxis' voice comes out small.

My heart sinks at the apology in his tone. "It has to work."

"You tried your best. Your father would be proud."

My arms go weak at the mention of my father. With a curse, I halt my efforts and rise to my feet. Angry tears stream down my cheeks as I stalk away from the body. It was all for nothing. I tried to save him. I tried to make up for the life I stole—

"Maisie, I think he's breathing."

I whirl back around. "He is?"

Podaxis waves a claw in front of the man's face. "Maybe?"

My heart pounds as I return to the man and crouch before him. Taking his face between my hands, I place my ear in front of his lips. At first, all I can hear is the rhythmic sound of waves lapping on the shore. Then a gasp.

It's ragged and shallow but very much there. A few seconds later, another breath follows.

Warmth floods my chest as I pull back, looking into the man's face. "He's breathing. He's alive!"

"You did it Maisie! Wonderful! Can we go?"

I open my mouth, but I don't know what to say. Now that I know he isn't dead, what do I do with him? I can't just leave him here…can I? He's far too heavy to carry outside of water, as evidenced by my fruitless efforts on his firm chest. My eyes flick to his still-open shirt, but I force my gaze back to his face. In the moonlight, his skin appears bronze, his hair black. Or perhaps it's just dark from the water. Whatever the case, I find myself wishing I could see him in daylight. My eyes fall to his mouth, to lips I now know are full of life. In fact, they're just plain full. Much fuller than Martin's. And that nose. It's the kind I like. A little crooked, perhaps broken a time or two, and not at all dainty. I've seen men who look like him on posters outside the boxing arenas on Halley Street. "He's kind of beautiful, isn't he?"

Podaxis rolls his eyes in answer.

With my hands still framing the man's face, I inch closer to study the length of the black lashes that brush his high cheekbones. What I wouldn't give to have lashes like that. Mine are short and pale and pink while his are —

A spray of water drenches my face as the man surges forward with a gasping cough. I squeal and release his face, scurrying back on my forearms. "Oh, for the love of shells, he's disgusting!"

"Did he just…spit on you?"

I frantically rub my face and scramble even farther from the man. When I dare look at him next, he's still on his back with his eyes closed, but his breathing has become more pronounced.

Podaxis taps my leg with a claw. "We really should go."

"I think you're right." Now that he's at least somewhat conscious, he can find his way home on his own. Unless…unless Faerwyvae isn't his home.

My stomach bottoms out. That isn't something I've allowed myself to consider until now. I've been focused on his survival, not what comes after.

So…what would my brothers do next?

After most rescues back home, survivors were escorted inside Bircharbor on planks. Rarely was anyone strong enough to walk on their own after almost drowning, and if they were, they were escorted by Father's guards. Survivors were then imprisoned at the palace until they could be processed. Their identities, motives, and citizenship had to be confirmed before they could either be punished, released on the isle, or sent on their way home. Father was ruthless with those who harbored ill intent—poachers, foolish humans trying to trick us into letting them onto the isle—but he was kind and generous with everyone else.

How does that help me? I have no prison to hold this man in, no way to decipher where he belongs. Even if I wasn't on the run, I have no legal authority, not even as a princess.

I glance at the towering stones that mark the invisible barrier. It stands behind me, taunting me with the indisputable fact that I escorted a man through the wall. Maybe illegally.

I shudder. No. I don't know that yet. He might be a citizen. Besides, did I have a choice? I couldn't have let him drown.

You're not a killer, my child.

Where Father's faith bolstered my confidence before, it now feels weak against the dreadful weight of possibility. Clenching my hands into fists, I march over to the man and nudge his shoulder with my foot. "Wake up. Where do you belong?"

He releases a soft groan but doesn't open his eyes.

Podaxis looks up at me. "Now shall I pinch him?"

I glance from him to the man and cross my arms. "Yes."

With far too much enthusiasm, Podaxis scuttles next to his face and clamps a pincher over the lobe of his ear.

The man's eyes flutter open and he lets out a weak shout, his breaths faster and heavier now. His brow furrows as he looks up at me, but his lids seem too heavy. He mutters something under his breath, too quiet to hear, before he goes slack yet again.

"What did he say?" I ask Podaxis.

"I don't know. Should I pinch him again? I can try somewhere more sensitive."

"No," I say with a sigh as I crouch down next to the man, careful to keep my face far enough out of range. I shake his shoulder, then slap his

cheek a few times. “Wake up, sir. You’re on the isle of Faerwyvae. Do you live here?”

His lids lift slightly, and he speaks again. More garbled words.

“I can’t hear you.”

“Saint. Lazaro.” Each word comes out with a wheeze, but this time they’re clear as day.

“You belong to the Church of Saint Lazaro?” I shudder, recognizing the name of the human religion. It’s one of many faiths on the isle…but with the worst reputation. Twelve years ago, the Church of Saint Lazaro started a rebellion against the fae and organized attacks in a few of the westernmost courts on the isle. The rebellion was short lived, however, and the resistance was quelled. Many still died, though, and despite over a decade of peace, it’s hard not to associate the church with the violence it once spurred. It’s even harder to forget their rather offensive teachings. They claim the fae aren’t people but the progeny of demons. Ridiculous.

I study the man’s clothing, finding nothing to suggest he’s one of the church’s fae-hating brothers.

He repeats the two words, stronger now. Followed by a third. “Sanctuary.”

I put the three words together. *Saint Lazaro sanctuary*. What about the church’s sanctuary?

The truth hits me all at once, making my breath catch.

He doesn’t mean *a* sanctuary. He’s asking for religious sanctuary.

I dart to my feet, my heart beating rapidly against my ribs. There’s only one reason a human would seek sanctuary after a shipwreck.

He isn’t supposed to be here.

6

I watch the man—unconscious again—for several silent moments, torn over what to do. I can't return him beyond the wall, for that would place him back in the sea. Even with the tide going out, there's no refuge beyond the standing stones. He'll drown.

After all the effort I put into saving him, can I leave him to that fate? Drag him to it?

Nausea turns my stomach and I know that I can't. I could never bring myself to do such a thing. But I can't help him either. I've already broken fae law by escorting him onto shore.

That leaves me three options.

One, report him to patrol officers and likely implicate myself in a punishable crime that could lead me to being found by Queen Nimue.

Two, aid him in seeking sanctuary with the church as requested. Another thing that could get me severely punished if discovered and risk my subterfuge.

Or three. Flee the scene and leave the man to sort out his own destiny.

It takes me no time at all to decide. I have but one choice. I made it when I first came to Lumenas. I'm supposed to hide, not play the hero. This has all been a huge mistake.

With a deep breath, I lift Podaxis in my arms and run.

I'm surprised I manage to remain on my feet as I return to downtown Lumenas. I think the only reason I'm not unconscious next to the man I left behind after my underwater ordeal is that—as a sea fae—water is my elemental affinity. While all fae have the ability to heal from most physical ailments quickly, a fae's elemental affinity has the power to strengthen them further. Not that I feel particularly *strong* right now. The shudders racking my body thanks to my cold, sodden clothes are proof of that. I just feel…not dead.

The city streets are quieter now than they were earlier tonight. They are still very much alive, but the crowds are sparser. Most of the tourists out this late are those seeking less-than-savory fare—brothels, gambling houses, vapor huts. Others are leaving public houses, weaving crooked paths as they navigate back to their hotels.

I realize I probably look much like these inebriated persons as I make my way down Halley Street, hunched over as I rub my hands over my arms to generate warmth and suppress my shivers. Thankfully I had the presence of mind to fetch my discarded clothes and shoes before I fled the bluff, but not even my dry jacket is doing much good at the moment.

It makes me think of the man I left to his fate. If I feel as awful as I do as a sea fae…how is *he* doing? Could he be dead already? Because I left him?

"You did the right thing," comes Podaxis' voice from inside my satchel.

I shake my head, realizing I'd stopped walking.

He peeks at me from under the flap. "There was nothing else you could have done that wouldn't have put you in grave danger."

I nod, unable to find my voice, and continue to walk. He's right. I know he is. It was dangerous for me to enter the sea, even more so to rescue a drowning man. What had I been thinking? What's the point of doing something that would make my father proud when he's not here to see it?

All my life, I never had to do much to impress Father. I'm his youngest child and the only daughter who hasn't moved out on her own centuries ago. It's always been just me and my brothers. Even they are much older, having reached maturity years before I was born. But, like Father, they doted on me. Perhaps a bit too much. Everyone was so protective over me, and I loved it. I was cautioned against swimming in the open ocean, so I didn't. I was forbidden from aiding with rescues, so I watched instead. I was told removing one's sealskin came with risks, so I remained a seal. I

was always too precious, too young. Honestly, I thrived off the special treatment and I don't think it helped that Podaxis had more trepidation than I did. To us, there was nothing better than lounging lagoon-side and having to do very little to earn anyone's affection or approval. For the longest time, I don't think Father ever looked at me without a warm smile stretched across his face, whether he was in seal form or seelie form.

My throat constricts as I recall the first time I wiped the smile off Father's face…

There was a dead boy at my feet, lying with my sealskin clutched in his fist…

Father looked from the boy to me, eyes wide and empty, lips pursed so tight they were devoid of color. I expected to see shame in his eyes, rage, disappointment. But I saw none of that. Instead, I witnessed fear that transformed into the deepest sorrow.

You're not a killer, my child.

I can't help but wonder how much more grief I would inflict if he found out I caused another death. Indirectly this time, but still…

"Shells," I curse through my teeth and quicken my pace. I reach Third and turn down it, heading for Orion. But when I reach Cygnus Street, I take a sharp right before I can think too much about it.

"Where are we going?" Podaxis asks, tone wary.

"You know where."

"Maisie, you shouldn't."

"But I am." Firming my resolve, I all but jog down Cygnus, also known as Salvation Street. For this is where all of Lumenas' many churches are. I was surprised at first to learn how many religious establishments there are in a city known for sin, but I suppose it makes sense. Where debauchery grows thick, so too rises the desperation for atonement. I walk past the varied façades of the churches. Some, like the Church of Dawn and Church of Saint Michaelo, host humble brick and stately turrets while others, like the Church of Undulating Pleasure, look more like something found on Halley Street with marble columns and bright bulbs of light. I'm not entirely sure half the churches here are home to legitimate religions, but I'll take the Church of Undulating Pleasure's word for it, scrawled over its brightly lit marquee: *Heaven is found in one's britches*.

Further down, outside the Church of Textiles, is another sign, this one propped on the sidewalk. It bears a black-and-white portrait of a startlingly

handsome human man. Next to it says: *Who Wants to Marry a Milliner? Prize: Randolph Hartz heart and a lifetime of very fine hats*. Beneath that, bold yellow letters announce: *Final night of the bridal pageant tomorrow. Who will he choose?*

I'd laugh if I weren't so focused on finding the Church of Saint Lazaro, so I pass the sign without more than a cursory glance. I'm not a frequent visitor of Salvation Street. There are normally too many judging eyes here for me to feel comfortable stealing, too many preachers standing outside their church's doors, too many zealots passing out flyers and promising a rollicking good time followed by verse and praise. I honestly shouldn't even be here now. Podaxis' anxious grumbles are reminder enough with every step I take.

"This is a bad, bad, very bad idea," he says.

"Most things I do start as bad ideas," I mutter back.

I slow my pace, looking everywhere for my destination as I pass church after church. In my imagination, Saint Lazaro is a building with menacing black turrets, perhaps surrounded by heads on pikes. The vision is so strong, I nearly miss the simple brick structure with a modest bronze plaque bearing the church's name. I stop before its doors, and my eyes fall onto a sign that looks much like the one that stood outside the Church of Textiles. Instead of a handsome hatmaker on it, there's a photograph of a man with thinning hair and a smile that looks more like a grimace. His eyes seem to leer straight from the black-and-white portrait. This one says: *Who Wants to Marry Brother Billius? Prize: Eternal salvation and five hundred citrine rounds. First night of pageantry begins…*followed by several dates that have been crossed out and updated, the most recent being today's date.

I quirk my brow, unable to decipher if the sign is being cheeky or serious. Five hundred citrine rounds is a decent fortune, considering a single round is worth ten chips. But to marry the man in the photograph?

"If you're going to do it, do it," Podaxis says. His voice reignites my sense of urgency.

Without a second thought, I climb the steps to the church's front door, tug the collar of my coat high around my neck, and pull my cap low. I listen for sound but there's none coming from within the building, which I suppose makes sense for a religious establishment well after midnight. I lift my fist to the door but pause. Do I knock? Just go inside? I don't know how churches work. I've never been inside one before.

With a deep breath, I decide on a knock. When no one answers, I knock again.

Finally, the door swings open, revealing a middle-aged man, as short as I am, with shoulder-length graying blond hair, a mustache, and eyes that are heavily creased at the corners. He's dressed in black robes decorated in gold embroidery at the neck and sleeves. On the right side of his caplet is an embroidered pair of crossed swords over a flame—the insignia of Saint Lazaro. He doesn't look at all like I imagined a church priest should. Especially with the dainty gold hoops he wears in his ears. The jewelry provides just a hint of flamboyance that makes him seem well-suited to Lumenas…but not a church. Aren't churches all about modesty? I suppose the Church of Undulating Pleasure would counter that assumption. With a nod, he steps to the side and extends a hand. Beyond him, I see a dark antechamber opening to a dimly lit room lined with rows of empty pews. "Greetings," he says, voice soft as if he fears frightening me away. "I am Father Viktor. Welcome to the Church of Saint Lazaro. We are always open for prayer."

"I'm not here for prayer," I say, keeping my head down and my voice low.

"Are you here for the bridal contest then? It's been…postponed. We shall resume tomorrow—"

"No," I say, glancing at the priest quickly before lowering my face again. Shudders run through me as I prepare to fulfill my reason for being here. My throat burns, knowing what I say next could make me even more of a criminal than I already am. Stealing for survival is one thing. Granting sanctuary to someone I illegally escorted to shore…

I inhale deeply, then release my words before I can keep them a second longer. "There's a man at Cape Vega seeking sanctuary with Saint Lazaro."

He furrows his brow and blinks at me a few times. "Pardon?"

"He's on the shore. Almost drowned. I don't know if he's alive. He's human."

"How—"

Before he can ask more, I turn away and rush down the stairs. I expect him to chase after me, ask me to clarify, but when I hazard a glance behind me, the priest is still watching me from the steps of the church. My stomach unclenches as relief washes over me. I did it. I delivered my message. Gave

the man one more chance to live. It was the right thing to do. The only thing to do.

I repeat that to myself as I make my way to the Vulture's Prose and slip silently through the back door. It's quiet backstage, with not a soul in sight. I wonder if the others are still out with Martin at the Honey House or if they've already returned and gone to bed. It is but a fleeting thought as my mind returns again and again to the man on the shore. To what I did. Despite all my reassurances that I made the right choice, I can't fight the unsettling mixture of dread and pride that churn within me.

When I reach the quiet solitude of my tiny room, I all but collapse next to my bed. Blind in the dark, I reach beneath my mattress until my fingers come against smooth fur. I tug my sealskin free and drape it over me like a blanket. Closing my eyes, I luxuriate in the warmth, resisting the urge to fully don it. I haven't allowed myself to shift into a seal since I left home, but I've kept my skin close. Safe. Hidden. It's the most indisputable proof of who I really am, one I can't risk anyone finding.

Nor can I fully let it go. It's part of me. All that's left of my childhood.

Podaxis climbs onto my knees. I expect him to chastise me for tonight's recklessness, but he says nothing. He must sense that I'm fully aware of it on my own.

It's fine. I'm fine. Everything is fine. No one will know what happened. I break the law every day. This isn't any different.

Speaking of breaking the law…

I remove my cap and run my hands over my still-damp hair. My heart sinks when my fingers come away empty. I should have known better than to expect my prized shell comb would still be there. It must have been swallowed by the ocean.

At least I still have the fork tucked into my coat pocket.

"I really wanted that comb," I say out loud.

Podaxis sighs. "Instead, you aided a fugitive in claiming sanctuary with an ill-reputed church."

"Fugitive. That's a strong word," I say. "How do we know he didn't just need a place to recover that isn't a jail cell?" Although my words are only stated for the sake of arguing with Podaxis, they make my heart feel somewhat lighter. What if that's all it was? What if I've been overreacting this whole time? What if he is a citizen or simply a lost seafarer who holds

no ill intent for my homeland? Who *would* want to go through such an arduous legal process after the trauma of surviving a shipwreck?

Podaxis opens his mouth, and I can tell he's dying to talk some sense into me. I give him a pointed look, and he releases a groan. Then, with only a hint of pandering, he says, "Perhaps you're right."

Feeling validated, not to mention all kinds of tired, I return my sealskin to its hiding place, giving the gray fur a final pat. Then I strip off my damp clothes and climb under the covers. I close my eyes and release all thoughts of daring rescues, violent waves, muscled chests, and dark, sea-soaked hair.

By tomorrow, it will be like nothing ever happened.

7

Four days have passed since my stupidly valiant rescue, and no one has come demanding my head. Not that anyone would go so far as to outright execute me, should my involvement in the illegal border crossing be found out. Instead, I'd be processed, tried, and likely defended by my father. I am a princess, after all. Then there's the bit about me being a killer and such. Considering fae can't lie, I might be forced to tell the truth about that. And then, regardless of whatever punishment I'd be given, that wouldn't even be the worst of it because next Queen Nimue would find me.

Find me, claim me, and make me a murderer.

It's a vicious spiral of thoughts that have plagued my mind the last few days, mostly in my weaker moments when I've debated whether I'd been truly out of my mind for rescuing the man.

But now…

Now life is about as normal as it can be. There are no extra patrol officers on the streets seeking leads on a rogue fae girl who aided a human fugitive. No whispers of a masked human killer suddenly let loose on the city after a mysterious shipwreck. In fact, there's no word on the ship, the wreck, or the survivor at all.

Podaxis and I were clearly overreacting.

Which is why, for the first time in four days, I have a full satchel of stolen goods. Without the fear of getting caught for something *other* than stealing constantly tensing my every move, I've been able to get back to work. The last few nights, my nerves got the better of me after a trinket or two, but tonight I've gathered a sequined purse full of citrine chips, three

pocket watches, a ring, a bracelet, and a beaded pearl necklace. I'm tempted to keep the last item for myself, but the prospect isn't nearly as exciting after losing my short-held hair comb. Nothing will ever be quite as pretty as that was.

It's early too. Not even midnight yet and already I've collected enough to put a smile on Mr. Tuttle's face.

"This calls for a celebration," I say with a skip in my step as we turn off Halley down Third. I don't let myself glance toward the Diamonde Opera house and the aristocrats gathered out front. I've firmly learned my lesson about stealing east of Third.

"Celebrate? What for?" Podaxis asks from inside my satchel.

"I don't know. The fact that I'm not behind bars."

"I suppose that's something to be proud of," he says, tone flat.

An idea sparks in my mind, one that sets my mouth watering. "We should get Lumies!"

"Oh, all right." For once, he sounds truly enthusiastic.

And why wouldn't he be? Lumies are one of the greatest highlights of Lumenas, a treat made from fluffy, airy, fried dough and dusted with cinnamon, cardamom, and bright yellow Starcane Sugar. They can be found anywhere from upscale restaurants to street vendors. The latter are my favorite because street vendors know not to skimp on the oil or sugar.

Podaxis peeks out from my satchel. "Which one are we going to? The place near the Vulture's Prose offers day-olds at three-for-one."

"No, I want to try the vendor on First and Cygnus."

He levels a stare at me with his beady, condemning eyes. "First and Cygnus. You mean we're walking down Salvation Street. Again."

I give a nonchalant shrug. "There's nothing wrong with walking down Salvation Street."

"You've done it at least once a day every day since…since *you know what*."

"Hmm," I say with an easy grin that I know will incense him. He's right though. I have walked down said street daily since *the incident*, always slowing my pace as we pass Saint Lazaro. I'm not even sure what draws me there aside from curiosity. I can't help but wonder how the man fared after nearly drowning. Did he survive? Is he hiding out at the church? Did they even follow my tip and collect him in the first place?

I try to tell myself I'm only interested to ensure I won't be implicated, but it's more than that. And it has nothing to do with a muscled chest, strong nose, and pretty face. Nothing at all.

I turn down Cygnus. It's quieter than it is on Halley, although several churches blare praise music from open doors—or sultry beats, if you're the Church of Undulating Pleasure. I pass the Church of Textiles and find the *Who Wants to Marry a Milliner* sign has been updated to say *Congratulations to the winner and the new happy couple*! There's a new portrait too, this one with the handsome hatmaker next to a buxom blonde wearing a hat so large it dwarfs the pair of lovers beneath it.

"Looks like he chose well," I mutter, then pick up my pace as we approach First Avenue. That's when I find the sidewalk has become far busier than it ever ought to be on Salvation Street. A crowd of young women stand in a chatting cluster ahead. At first, I think they too had the brilliant idea to buy Lumies, but I quickly realize I'm mistaken. The crowd is on this side of First, not at the vendor across the street, and…I'm taken aback to realize they're in front of the Church of Saint Lazaro.

I pause, brow furrowed as I study the gossiping girls. They stand around a sign on the sidewalk—the same one that held Brother Billius' portrait last time I saw it. Each time I checked the sign this week, the start date was changed to the current day. I wonder if the ladies are laughing at the unfortunate man's fate. I walk a little closer until I'm able to grasp snippets of conversation through their lively giggles.

"…twenty thousand citrine rounds a year!"

"Would you really want to marry a man of Saint Lazaro?"

"Not normally, but with a worth of twenty thousand citrine rounds, I'm starting to change my mind. Is that the running salary for any man of the church?"

"With a face like that, he could be worth a single chip and I'd still take my chances."

"He seeks a fae bride. That's hardly fair."

A giggle. "I could pretend I've got fae blood."

I frown. Something tells me either the brotherhood has begun fabricating Brother Billius' assets, or the sign isn't about him at all. I draw closer, peering between the women's skirts. The crowd is so focused on the sign, none of them notice I'm there.

Which would make for a decent opportunity to add a few trinkets to my satchel…

I assess the girls with fresh eyes, looking for hair clips, bracelets, necklaces. Finally, I spot a lazily held purse slung over a lady's wrist. She's so enraptured with the gossip that I doubt she'd notice if I tapped her on the shoulder and asked her to hand it over. I won't of course. Instead, I just need to brush by and—

A corner of the sign catches my eye, halting me in my place. "What in the name of the shells…" I shoulder my way between two women and stare at the photograph.

Podaxis lifts the flap of my satchel to look as well. "Oh my, that's… that's…"

"Yep." My gaze locks on the black-and-white portrait. I recognize the square jaw, the high cheekbones, full lips, dark hair. The only unfamiliar features in the photograph are the dazzling dark eyes that had been hiding behind closed eyelids on the beach.

Next to the portrait, the sign proclaims, *Who Wants to Marry Brother Dorian? Prize: Eternal salvation and marital bliss. Worth: Twenty thousand citrine rounds per annum. Eligibility: must be of fae blood.*

Heat floods my cheeks as every inch of me prickles with irritation. With a huff, I stomp around the still-chattering crowd. "Well, he seems to be getting along just fine."

"Why do you seem annoyed about that?" Podaxis asks.

I open my mouth but realize I don't know the answer. Why am I so bothered by seeing the boy I rescued on a sign?

When I don't reply, Podaxis speaks again. "Didn't you want to see that he's alive and well?"

I fumble for words before I find ones that aren't too much of a lie. "Sure, I did, but he took poor Brother Billius' place in the pageant! His bridal competition never even began."

"Those contests have become quite the popular spectacle around here, haven't they? Is that the newest trend in Lumenas? Marrying a stranger and making a big production of it?"

I don't answer because I have additional questions of my own. "Why does he insist on marrying someone of fae blood? Doesn't Saint Lazaro's brotherhood hate the fae?"

“They certainly have a reputation for it,” Podaxis says. “Although, there is one reason he could desire such a match. Have you heard about the latest scientific findings on human aging in Faerwyvae?”

“What findings?” I ask as we turn the corner on First.

“Well,” he says, taking on a tone that makes him sound like more of a know-it-all than he already is, “studies have shown that—ever since the end of the war and unification of the isle—humans who are in close relationships with the fae experience a slow in aging. It could possibly make them ageless like us. Of course, the isle has only been unified for twenty-two years and human-fae relationships are still taboo to some. So it’s impossible to know just how long their lifespans will increase, but it is certain that being in a relationship with a fae brings that particular benefit to a human.”

I snort a laugh. “How do you know about that? Better yet, why do you clearly have this fact memorized like you’re just waiting for the chance to recite it?” Realization quickly dawns. “Shells, Podaxis, you’re saving this information for Nadia, aren’t you? Is this what you’re prepared to tell her when you profess your undying affection?”

“You are…well, you are just…rude. I wouldn’t come to Nadia with facts and figures, should I ever speak aloud my intentions. I’d…it’s none of your business. I read it in the broadsheets and thought you’d want to know.”

I can tell I’ve embarrassed him but it’s impossible to stifle my laughter. When I do manage to sober from my amusement, I’m left to ponder the truth of what he said. If humans have experienced a slow in aging ever since the end of the war, I wonder if it also explains how I aged so quickly. Unlike my brothers, who didn’t reach maturity until they were a few centuries old, I reached it in less than two decades. I aged…like a human. Since fae don’t conceive as often or as easily as humans do, not to mention my rather sheltered childhood, I haven’t met many other full-blood fae who were born after the isle was unified. Except for Podaxis, of course. He too aged like I did.

I suppose it makes a strange sort of sense. Humans began affecting the fae from the moment they set foot on our isle thousands of years ago. Back then, all fae were what we now call unseelie. Spirits, animals, creatures. It wasn’t until humans taught us language and began sharing clothing and food that my kind learned to adopt their ways. That’s when we figured out how to shift, adopting a seelie form that mimicked humankind. Now that

humans and fae live together, kept safe and protected by our magic-infused barrier, it makes sense that we would begin to change *each other*.

That doesn't make me any less annoyed about this so-called Brother Dorian. The nerve of him to survive a shipwreck only to put on a bridal pageant in search of a fae wife. Was his brush with death enough to make him desperate for the chance at immortality that a fae bride would bring?

Despite my grating agitation, it does make one thing clear. "You know, I think this is a good thing," I tell Podaxis. "It means you were wrong about him. He's not a fugitive. He's a brother of Saint Lazaro and has clearly been a citizen this whole time. I bet he just didn't want to deal with the legal process of crossing the border in the middle of the night."

"Then why was he out at sea?"

The question sinks some of my conviction, but I shrug off my suspicion. "A mission trip, obviously. He was spreading the good word."

"Does Saint Lazaro have a good word to say?"

I bark a laugh. "That was clever, Podaxis. I like it."

He sighs and peers up at me from my bag. "What I don't like is that you passed the Lumies vendor two streets ago. Were we not going to try the ones on First and Cygnus?"

I pull up short, realizing he's right. We're almost to Orion and my plan to get Lumies was derailed by that stupid sign. "You're right, Podaxis. We came this way to celebrate, and now we have further cause to. Not only did I save a boy, but I rescued a man of the church, one who will now go on to be a happily married husband. And if he has his way with this fae bride he so desperately wants, then he won't die for…a long time."

"Yes, Pearl, well done. Now, can we get Lumies?"

With a chuckle, I turn around and make my way back toward the street vendor. The one just across from Saint Lazaro. I buy my treats, stuff them into my mouth with relish, and only cut a glare at Brother Dorian's sign once.

Twice.

Five times.

With sugar sweetness coating my lips, I tip my cap at the sign. "You're welcome," I mutter with a final glower.

8

By the time we make it home to the Vulture's Prose, my stomach aches from eating six Lumies in rapid succession. Even Podaxis mutters a groan or two as I set him on the ground inside the theater, and he only ate three. Still, I have no regrets as I hand over my stolen treasures to Mr. Tuttle, claim ten citrine chips as payment, and then head down the hall that leads to the bedrooms. With every step, I remove an article of clothing—my hat, my jacket, my waistcoat—until I'm feeling light and free in my trousers, shirt, and suspenders. I run a hand through my tresses with a sigh, noting how surprisingly quiet it is backstage. None of the performers are chatting about or rehearsing lines for tomorrow. Martin isn't loitering about, inviting Klaus and Stanley out for drinks or making baby harp seal eyes at me. It's for the best, as all I want now is a quiet evening and sleep.

All hope of that is lost when I open the door to my bedroom. My stomach plummets as I find Martin standing in the dark room, lit only by the small square window over my bed. His arms are clasped behind his back, and he says nothing. He seems…different. Stiff. Angry. I wish I could convince myself he's here for a casual visit, but I know that's not the case. This is about the dreaded *us*.

"Shells," I curse under my breath. I'm frozen in my doorway, unsure how to respond. Finally, I release a sigh. "We should…talk."

Podaxis skitters back, tapping his pincers together. "I'll…uh…go see if Nadia's home."

Once he's down the hall, I enter my room and close the door behind me. The space is tiny, with just enough room for my narrow bed, a side table,

and a few feet of walking space. So it's quite awkward when I'm forced to skirt close to Martin just to light the lamp on my bedside table. All the while, he does nothing but watch me. With the room brightened to a dim glow, I steel my nerves and face my former lover. I can't bring myself to meet his eyes, keeping my gaze on his chest instead. He's dressed in trousers and shirtsleeves, not unlike what I've seen him wear before. But there's something off about him. "Martin, I…"

My mind reels as I sort through what I need to say.

He shifts slightly, and one arm emerges from behind his back. His hand comes toward me, and I tense, expecting him to touch my cheek. Instead, he holds a fist between us. My brow furrows as I watch him uncurl his fingers to reveal a glittering object in the center of his palm, silver inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

It's my shell-shaped hair comb.

The one I lost when I rescued Brother Dorian.

I'm about to take it from him but stop myself. My eyes flash to his face. "Where did you get this?"

That's when I realize something is very wrong. His eyes aren't the pale blue I'm used to but gray and much larger than they should be. The planes of his face are slightly skewed, too full in places, and too rigid in others. His blond hair is a shade too dark. I probably wouldn't have noticed had I not spent those nights in such close quarters with him, in this very room, in this exact shade of light. My gaze moves to his shoulders—shoulders I initially assumed were draped in a cape, but now…

It's not a cape at all. It's my sealskin. The sight makes my stomach roil.

I step back. "Who are you—"

The not-Martin smiles in such an unfamiliar way it sends bile rising to my throat. "Catch," he says, voice deep but not entirely masculine as he tosses my hair comb into the air. On reflex, I catch it, just as his hand clasps around my upper arm. His other arm comes forward from behind his back, revealing a small silver hexagonal compact. With a flick of his thumb, it opens, spilling a bright light into my room.

I struggle to escape his grip, but I feel claws dig into my skin. The light from the compact grows blindingly bright, forcing me to close my eyes against its glare. My heart slams against my ribs as a strange humming begins to buzz all around me, over me, through me. For a moment, I fear it will tear my body in two.

Then it stops.

The glow dims.

I blink a few times as my eyes adjust to the absence of the light. The first thing I see is Martin. No, it isn't Martin at all but a female fae with iridescent silver and brown scales in a striped pattern, long black claw-like nails, and short-cropped brown hair. She's several inches taller than me but appears perhaps a year younger than I am. She could be centuries older, however, for her pointed ears tell me she's full fae. Her eyes are pale with a W-shaped pupil, like a cuttlefish. She's unclothed aside from my sealskin that remains over her shoulders like a cape. With a glare, I try to tug myself free from her grip. This time she releases me and crosses her arms over her chest.

I glance at where my door should be, prepared to run, but find I'm no longer in my room. Instead, I'm in a dim corridor made entirely of tightly woven coral. Orbs of warm light hover above sconce-like coral outcroppings. I look from one end of the corridor to the other. The hall seems to go on forever, but the other side…

A shadowed figure strolls toward us. When I make to step back, the female fae grabs my arms again. "Let me go," I say, but it's no use. She may look close to my age but she's far stronger than I am, especially with those sharp claws piercing my flesh.

The figure draws near one of the orbs of light, and it illuminates a female form with pale skin and long silver hair draped over a naked torso. At her waist rests a belt woven from seaweed from which pouches and sheathed weapons hang. Below the belt, her flesh turns to black scales that extend into a long, trailing serpent's tail. Her upper body remains upright like someone in seelie form, but instead of walking with legs, she slithers side to side, aided by the movements of her sinuous tail. She stops before me and smiles with blood-red lips that part to reveal a mouth of pointed teeth. Her appearance is equal parts beautiful and horrifying. While I've never met her in person before, there's no questioning who she is. I've heard more than enough to fill my nightmares ever since Father first shared tales of her terror.

"Queen Nimue," I say through gritted teeth.

"My darling Maisie," she says with wistful warmth. "I'd hoped you'd call me Mother."

~

FOR SEVERAL MOMENTS I CAN DO NOTHING BUT STARE AT THE WOMAN WHO birthed me. The monster I never cared to meet and who apparently felt the same about me. Hundreds of angry retorts storm through my mind. It takes all my restraint to remain aloof. With one arm still seized by the fae who captured me, I prop my other at my waist and try to act nonplussed. Finally, I find my voice, forcing it out smooth like sea glass. "You may have given my father a good rubbing and retched me from your nethers, but you're no mother to me."

She lifts her chin and gives a tittering laugh. "You're more my daughter than you know, Maisie dear."

I bat my lashes. "Is that why I've been running from you for a year?"

She slithers closer. "Just look at you. A perfect combination of Ronan and me."

I bristle at the sound of my father's name uttered so causally from her lips. As lifelong adversaries, their one-time affair was nothing but a mistake of passions. She has no right to call him *Ronan* like they're old friends. He's a fellow monarch of the Sea Court, that's all. The calm, careful seelie rule to temper her violent unseelie reign.

Now that we're standing so close, I can't help but see what she means about my looks. While all my brothers are the spitting image of Father in seelie form, with his same shade of copper-red hair and his dark, freckled skin, I turned out just a little different. My hair is pink instead of red. My skin, while freckled, is more of a golden tan than umber. I never thought the differences had anything to do with my mother, considering my brothers were all conceived by different women too. Her pale skin and silver hair make my appearance a bit more…logical. And here I always thought I was just extra cute. The realization that I inherited *anything* from Nimue makes my stomach churn like a stormy sea.

I channel my unease into anger and try to pull from the fae's grip again.

"Release her, Zara," Nimue says gently.

Zara burns me with a glare before letting go of my arm. Then she tosses something at Nimue. As she catches it, I recognize the silver compact Zara had before the light swallowed us whole. Somehow, it managed to take me from my room to wherever we are now in an instant. Or had it simply knocked me out? I find both scenarios unlikely.

Free from Zara's grip, I take a step away and put both hands on my hips. One hand curls around a hard object, reminding me of the hair comb I still hold. I lift my chin. "How did you find me?"

She laughs. "How could I not? I'm a—what do they call me on land? A witch?"

"They call you a lot of things and none are meant to flatter."

"Ah, yes. I do like those titles. They make me sound rather vicious, do they not?"

"That's one word for it."

She lifts her chin, an approving smile tugging her lips. "Maisie dear, ever since your father told me what you can do, I've been looking for you."

The blood leaves my face. "What do you mean he *told* you?" When Father warned me I'd be hunted by Nimue after killing Luther, he seemed determined to keep the queen from finding me. He was desperate to keep me safe, which was why he originally intended to marry me off in a different court on land. So why in the name of the shells would he tell her about what I did?

An answer comes to me, one so terrifying I start to tremble. "What did you do to him?" My head fills with the worst possible scenarios. Did she kill him? Torture him? If he'd been assassinated, I would have heard about it through gossip, wouldn't I? The death of a fae royal is hardly small news.

Nimue lifts a brow. "I didn't do anything to your father, my little pearl."

My reeling thoughts go still. I can't believe her. Can I? Her inability to lie doesn't mean she can't deceive. I open my mouth, but no sound comes out.

"We have much to discuss," Nimue says with a sigh. "But first, I need to do this."

She slithers toward me, and I lurch away. I don't get far before Zara is at my back, hands clenched around my arms, restraining them behind my back to keep me in place. Why is she so damn strong? Nimue closes in and frames my face with her hands. I fight to pull away, but her grip is firm on my cheeks. Her face remains gentle as she stares down at me with a soft smile. Then she parts her ruby lips and begins to sing. The tune is strange and chilling, laced with words in a language I don't understand. The song falls over me, wraps around me like a blanket. Every word seems to skitter over my skin, drawing each hair on my body to stand on end. Pressure

tightens my lungs, squeezing my heart with a sharp pain. I bite back a cry, certain she's killing me—

Then the song cuts off, and the agony ends. Nimue releases me, and Zara frees me as well. My eyes burn into my mother's. "What did you just do to me?"

She turns away and begins to slither down the coral corridor. "Come along," she says over her shoulder. "Run away and you'll be dead in ten days."

9

Jaw slack, I stare at Nimue's back. *Dead in ten days*. Did she just…put a curse on me? My mother continues to slither down the hall while fear and rage fight to drown out my senses.

An elbow to my side snaps me to attention. "Go," Zara says with a sneer, "or I'll drag you by your hair."

I'm too stunned, too shaken to do anything but obey. Gritting my teeth, I focus on my anger to keep my fear at bay, and stalk after Nimue's retreating form. She leads me down several twists and turns through the coral halls. Zara follows close behind like a vicious shadow, prodding me in the back whenever she deems it necessary. Which is every five seconds. I cut a glare over my shoulder at her only to find a much sharper one being cast back at me. I take the opportunity to assess her lithe body, seeking weaknesses. Between her firm-looking scales, the near-foot of height she has on me, and the sharp claws at the tips of her webbed fingers, I doubt she has any weakness to exploit. Her appearance leaves me unsure if she's in her seelie or unseelie form. Some fae are harder to tell apart in their different forms. Selkies, like me, have obvious distinctions between our two forms—one being a seal, the other being almost identical to a human. Then there are other kinds of fae with less variances between the two. Some fae walk on two legs in both forms, with only minor differences in skin or hair.

I suppose it doesn't matter what form Zara wears now, for I'm certain she'd overpower me no matter what. I face forward yet again, fighting my urge to round on the fae, punch her in her scaly face, and tear my sealskin off her shoulders. But, considering I've spent most of my life as a rather

lazy seal, I've no idea how to fight. Steal, yes. Stealing requires being clever, fast, and unseen. Fighting, on the other hand…I wouldn't know where to begin. My only weapon is my little hair comb, and I doubt that would do much damage. I could enter the Twelfth Court, I suppose. Halt time and retrieve my sealskin, then flee the opposite way down the halls. But where do those corridors end? Will I even find freedom before Zara or Nimue catch up with me?

No, the best thing I can do is stay calm. Follow. The sooner I understand where I am, the sooner I can find a way to get out of here. I narrow my eyes at Nimue's back, trying to see if she still holds the silver compact Zara threw at her. The one that brought me here by some strange magic. If I can steal it…

Run away and you'll be dead in ten days.

Then there's that, of course.

The corridors grow wider the farther we go, the walls more elegant now. Iridescent shells decorate the walls, and conches replace the coral sconces. The orbs of light hovering above them are brighter now. Finally, our path opens into a wide room with a domed coral ceiling. From the center hangs a pearl chandelier glittering with more of the orb lights. The floor is smooth sand with pearlescent pillars lining the perimeter. Between them, more halls branch off. Nimue slithers toward a dais. Upon it rests an enormous open clamshell fitted with a velvet cushion. Flanking it are two large, crystal-blue pools. She lowers onto her seat and beckons me forward. Zara, finding my movements too slow, jabs an elbow into my spine.

I round on her. "Will you quit that?"

She bares her teeth, but before she can respond, Nimue speaks. "Leave us, Zara. Fetch the Sisters."

Zara snaps her teeth at me and turns on her heel.

I start after her. "Give me back my sealskin, you clam-blasted harpy."

"Language, daughter," Nimue says with a titter. "The unseelie sea fae happen to like harpies."

"Make her give me back my skin. Have you any idea how offensive it is that she's wearing it like that?"

"You may earn your sealskin back, but in the meantime, I need Zara to keep it safe for you."

I clench my jaw, fuming as Zara strides out of the room and into one of the adjoining halls. A helpless feeling threatens to paralyze me, pull me into

a pool of grief, but I drown it before it grows too deep. Fear won't help me now. Sorrow won't either. All I have are my wits. And a year of training as a thief.

With slow steps, I walk toward Nimue, assessing my surroundings with fresh eyes. "Nice throne room you have here," I say. I've only been inside two palaces in my entire life. Bircharbor, of course, although I rarely spent time indoors. And then Selene Palace, seat of the Unseelie Queen of the Lunar Court. That's where Father sent me to try and wed the queen's heir before I ran away. I wasn't there for long, but I was able to study its royal luxury, assess the ways it differed from Bircharbor. The room I'm in now is undoubtedly a throne room, which tells me I'm inside Ginevra Palace.

Hope blooms bright in my heart. I've heard of Ginevra Palace, and I know roughly where it is. I'm surprised to find it filled with air and not water, for the palace is rumored to be under the sea. I suppose it makes sense that part of the palace would hold air, though, for there are many kinds of sea fae that require oxygen. Besides, it was built to accommodate both sea fae and land fae alike. Long ago before the first fae war, the palace was ruled by Queen Melusine—Nimue's mother. Who, I suppose, is also my maternal grandmother. She ruled the sea from Ginevra while her mate, King Herne, ruled the Autumn Court from a palace that was built as close to the sea as a land ruler could be. Bircharbor. My home. The palace Father rules from now. More significant than all of this, though, are the rumors that coral caves once linked the two palaces so the royal lovers could visit each other with ease. The caves are said to have been since destroyed, some filled with air, others with water, all collapsed into dead ends. But still…

I'm close to home. To Father. If I can only—

"Don't forget what I said, my little pearl." Nimue watches me through slitted lids. "You'll find no aid reversing my curse should you try and leave without my blessing. Not even your dear father has magic strong enough to counteract mine. But never mind that. We're alone for the time. Let us speak freely as mother and daughter."

"Mother and daughter," I mutter with scorn.

Nimue ignores the venom in my tone as she continues to smile at me from her throne. "Ask me anything and I will answer, my love."

I bristle at her use of *my love*. As if she knows the meaning of the word. And yet, I do have questions. I cross my arms, focusing on the feel of the shell comb still clenched in my hand. The smooth mother-of-pearl beneath

my fingers gives me something to focus on that isn't panic. I pop a hip to the side. "You never told me how you found me."

"Like I said, I've been looking for you," Nimue says. "Ever since your father told me of your power, I've cast my magic into the sea every day searching for your essence."

I quirk a brow. "My…essence?"

"Yes. Please tell me you know something of fae magic."

"I know about elemental affinities and all that," I say with a glower.

"Good. As we know, sea fae have a natural affinity for the water element. You must also know that each ruler in Faerwyvae has access to all four elements, to varying degrees."

I nod, trying to appear like everything she's saying is old news. The truth is there's a lot about magic I don't know. I don't know how to weave a glamour or make the ocean obey my whims. The only time I ever wield magic myself is when I remove my sealskin, and that only requires a brief touch of magic. I suppose I use it to enter the Twelfth Court too, but that's still quite a mystery to me.

She continues. "Like other rulers, I can manipulate water, air, fire, and earth. But there's a fifth element very few fae can touch. It's the element of spirit. While I may resemble my mother in almost every way, it's my father's magic that sets me apart from the other royals. He was a banshee, a death singer, and it is because of him that I can work with the spirit element. *That* is what I mean by essence. As your mother, I need nothing more than my own blood to seek your essence. And four days ago, I felt it. Felt you enter the sea. It was the same day Zara returned with that little trinket you hold now, found at the bottom of the ocean near a shipwreck. It was rich with your essence, and I then knew exactly how to find you."

I'm perplexed by her mention of spirit magic but try not to let it show. I had no idea that's what makes her so strong.

"I cast an enchantment so Zara could follow your essence, and she located you. She watched you for a few days, followed you. Then she brought you here."

I want to ask how Zara was able to look like Martin, but Nimue speaks again before I can.

"Now, daughter, sate my curiosity in turn. Tell me what you can do."

I watch her in silence for a few moments. What exactly does she know? There's no need to give her more information than she has. "Why ask me? I

thought you said my father already told you."

"He did tell me. He had no choice."

A chill ripples through me. "Yet you said you did nothing to him."

"Your father and I had a binding agreement before you were even born. We fought over who you would belong to, which court you would serve, until we finally came to a compromise. We bargained that, should you be born a seal, you would live with him. But if you were born in any other form, you'd be mine. Additionally, should you ever prove to be blessed with magic like I have—the power over life and death that I inherited from my banshee father—he would tell me, and you would thereafter belong to me. He found a weakness in the *tell me* part and waited almost an entire year after your magic manifested before he finally confessed."

I take in her words. Father never mentioned a bargain. Never informed me that Nimue could have a valid claim on me. The first time I learned I was in danger from her was the day I killed Luther. He never told me the danger would be caused by him telling Nimue about my deadly magic. My stomach ties itself in knots, and I don't know if I should feel betrayed. Surely Father was only trying to protect me. Right?

"Anyhow," Nimue says, shaking me from my uncomfortable musings, "tell me about this kissing magic."

"Why, so you can exploit it?"

Just then, sound comes from outside the throne room. Seconds later, a dozen or so female forms enter from the corridors, while others emerge from the two pools next to the throne. Zara leads a group of fae who look somewhat like her—scaly bodies in differing shades of color, gills at their necks, and claw-tipped fingers. The fae who rise from the pools are types I recognize—beautiful undines, naiads, and sea nymphs, blue-skinned nixies, sirens with fleshy upper bodies that end in scaled tails, kelpies with sleek, black, equine bodies and red eyes.

The fae settle in around Nimue's throne. Some stare adoringly at their queen while others cut glares at me from across the room. I breathe in deeply, willing myself not to panic or show fear.

"Sisters of the Black Eel, please meet my daughter, Maisie. Maisie, these are my most loyal subjects."

What she means is her most loyal assassins. I've heard of the Sisters of the Black Eel. Nimue led them under Queen Melusine. Both Nimue and my father served in the now-deceased queen's army, but each had different

roles. Before unification of the isle, peace with the humans was tenuous. Father was responsible for defending the isle against seafaring trespassers, while Nimue's Sisters of the Black Eel doled out covert justice. Father was the public face of the underwater army while Nimue was its hidden power. After the humans united with the fae, Nimue took Melusine's place as Unseelie Queen of the Sea Court. Although there are rules in place that restrict Nimue from conducting unsanctioned assassinations, Father feared she'd disobey them to the isle's demise. That's when he took his place as Seelie King of the Sea, once again standing for peace and combating Nimue's violent tendencies.

I don't even want to consider how they ever came to have an affair.

"Maisie, before you stand the most powerful females of the sea, each with a special talent that serves our court. You too have a valuable talent. While I asked you to tell me about it, I think I'd prefer you showed me instead."

"Excuse me?"

She snaps her fingers. "Zara."

The fae's jaw tenses as she casts a questioning glance at her queen. When Nimue refuses to acknowledge it, Zara lifts her chin and saunters over to me.

"Now, Maisie, show me what you can do."

I look from Zara to Nimue. "You…want me to kiss her?"

Nimue gives a single nod.

"I'll kill her."

"I'm not worried."

My gaze moves to Zara, who reveals no hint of fear behind her pursed lips and unsettling stare. "Do it already," she taunts.

I take a step back, but she closes in.

"What is it, little seal? Lost your disdain for me so soon? Or have you no taste for kissing a female?"

"I…I'd kiss anyone just fine," I say, cursing myself a second too late for my pathetic response.

"Prefer something more…familiar?" The scales shift on her face, fluttering from scalp to chin, forming the not-quite-Martin's face. "Kiss me," she says in a deep voice that almost sounds convincing.

I step back, but again she shadows my retreat.

“How about this?” The scales on her face shift, replacing Martin’s visage with dark skin, freckles, and copper-red hair.

I freeze at the sight of my father’s likeness, this one eerily accurate. “I’m a cuttlefish sprite, adept at glamours that mimic other people. I can be anyone you want me to be.” Her face shifts again, this time looking only slightly similar to the boy I rescued—Brother Dorian. It seems to me her impersonations are only as good as her familiarity with the person she’s mimicking. Does that mean she’s seen Dorian in person? Or has she only spied his black-and-white photograph on the sign outside the church while stalking me on my mother’s behalf? If the latter is the case, she’s somehow managed to glean an accurate shade of flesh and hair.

“You’re pathetic,” Zara says under her breath, bringing her face—now back to her own—uncomfortably close to mine. “You couldn’t kill me if you tried.”

“You *want* me to kill you?”

“No, I want to crawl from the sea and slither ashore near your little lagoon, wearing your face. From there, I want to find each of your brothers and slit them throat to root and peel the skin from their bones. Then I want to make a cape of their sealskins, parade around in their flesh, and march right up to your pathetic, boneless, brainless father and—”

With a rage coursing through my blood, I surge forward and press my lips to hers. I do nothing else to make it a kiss, just press my mouth as hard as I can on hers to halt her vile words. Then I lurch back, placing several feet between us. She stands in place, lips curling into a smirk as she shakes her head. “You’re—” The next word gets caught on a choke. Her smile dissolves in an instant as her hands fly to her throat. Her skin turns a shade paler.

I glance from her to Nimue and her assassins. All watch with curiosity, not a single one revealing an ounce of concern for their Sister.

Zara falls to the ground, and I find myself frozen in place, trembling as I watch another person die by my poisonous lips.

10

I don't notice Nimue when she rises from her throne, only when she lays a hand on my shoulder. "You did well," she whispers, then gently pushes me aside. I expect her to lift the dead body in her arms but instead, she stands before it.

And closes her eyes.

A familiar sensation fills my bones, one that tugs me forward, inward. It offers peace and tranquility, a way to stop time and escape who I am. What I've done. So I close my eyes too.

When I open them, the world has turned to violet.

My dread lessens by half as the magic of the Twelfth Court surrounds me. For once, though, I'm not alone. I suppose I'm never actually alone when I visit this realm, but normally, I'm the only one moving freely about it. This time, there's someone else here.

Nimue.

Her body is composed of purple particles like everything else, but unlike the bright violet figures of the frozen assassins and the waning purple hue that comprises the body on the floor, she seems aware of her surroundings. She slithers around Zara and heads toward a form I hadn't noticed at first, one a little more shapeless than the rest as it floats and undulates a few feet away from Zara. Nimue approaches the light-being and offers a hand. "Come child," Nimue whispers in a voice that sounds both too loud and too quiet in this strange world. "It is not your time yet."

The violet form ripples once. Twice. Then something like an arm extends from it, allowing Nimue to take hold. With one hand grasping that

of the light-being and the other propped behind it, Nimue turns around and gently ushers it forward. When they reach Zara's body, Nimue softly sings to it in what sounds like the same language she cursed me with. The light-form begins to lower, inch by inch, and Nimue lowers with it until the light fills the shape that was Zara's body. Nimue continues to sing, the tune a haunting wail. When the song ends, she rises back to her full height. Then her face whips toward mine. A ripple of panic runs through me as she tilts her head to the side. "Are you here too, my little pearl?"

The question is enough to snap me out of the Twelfth Court. I open my eyes to find time has returned to normal. I brace myself for the nausea I expect to follow, but it doesn't come. Not this time. Is it because I wasn't the one to open the connection to the realm? Did I just piggyback off my mother's link to the Twelfth Court? More concerning is the fact that she entered the realm at all, which means…that's another strange power I inherited from her.

I meet her eyes and find she's watching me through slitted lids, a knowing smile on her lips. "You, my child, are full of surprises," she says.

I'm saved from replying when Zara stumbles to her feet, gasping for breath. She bares her teeth when she sees me and takes a forbidding step forward, claws extended. "You blubber-headed seal pup—"

"Enough," Nimue says, voice firm. "You knew what you were getting into, Zara."

Zara halts her steps but doesn't take her eyes off me.

"Return to the Sisters," Nimue demands.

A low growl rumbles from Zara's throat, but she obeys, glaring at me with every step she takes.

"I'm proud of you, daughter." Nimue grins at me as if I'd just performed my first underwater backflip. "Now, we have much more to discuss." With that, she slithers to her throne and takes a seat.

"Like how you just made me kill someone?"

She waves a flippant hand at Zara. "She was barely dead. And look, she's fine now!"

Zara scoffs.

"I have nothing to discuss with you," I say. "I don't have to talk to you, listen to you—"

"As a matter of fact, you do. According to my bargain with your father, you serve under my rule now. Your allegiance is to me. Nothing can break

that."

Nothing…except marriage to another court. For the love of the shells, Father knew so much more than he'd let on. If he'd been honest with me from the start, I might have done things differently when he sent me to marry a land prince. Forget worrying about being rejected when my lethal kiss was discovered. I could have threatened the prince with it! Forced him to marry me and keep me safe. Fiery rage courses through my blood but it's quickly extinguished. Because, at the end of the day, I'm not fire. I'm water. I'm a soft little seal who can't even handle killing someone I hate, much less threatening an innocent.

"What do you want from me then? Are you going to force me to join your Sisters? Arrange murders for me to carry out?"

Nimue studies me, a ponderous look in her eyes. "I suppose you don't have to join the Sisters." She says it begrudgingly, but there's something calculating about her tone. "In fact, I could release my claim on you altogether."

My heart pulses with hope but my suspicion is stronger. "How so?"

She leans back in her throne, her serpent's tail flicking this way and that. "You took something from the Sisters, daughter. Saved a life that was never meant to be spared."

I know at once who she means. Brother Dorian. "You were responsible for the shipwreck."

"Yes."

"Why? What did he do to deserve your wrath?"

She barks a laugh. "You have no idea what kind of monster you rescued. His name is Dorian Ariko, and he's the son of Astern Ariko. Does that name sound familiar?"

I shake my head.

"It figures. I assume your father gave you a sheltered life at Bircharbor. Regardless, Astern Ariko was part of Saint Lazaro's brotherhood, a man following the Order of Strength. After the rebellions were quelled, he took fae prisoners who'd been captured during the skirmishes and brought them in secret to his personal estate. In his very own cellar, he started an illegal fighting ring that he operated for three years before the fae discovered it. His captive fae were forced to fight, sometimes with each other or other newly captured fae, sometimes against men of Saint Lazaro. Many fae died, and by the time the fighting ring was exposed, there was only one fae left. A

sea fae. She was killed by Astern's son, Dorian Ariko, when the boy was only ten years old."

"Why did he kill the fae?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper. I can't seem to reconcile a murderous ten-year-old with the handsome photograph outside the church.

Nimue shrugs. "He's the son of his father. What other reason could he have? Astern Ariko was raising his son to follow in his footsteps and join the Order of Strength within Saint Lazaro's brotherhood. Many believe the boy was training to fight when he killed the fae, despite him claiming it was self-defense. But the fae he killed was stabbed seven times, and when the boy was found, he was covered head to toe in her blood as if he'd bathed in it."

The visual sends bile rising to my throat.

She continues. "Astern and all the others who participated in the fighting ring were executed, but the Alpha Council deemed the boy innocent. Hardly a soul truly believed he was, though, not even the royals."

I'm surprised to hear the crime was big enough to make it into the Alpha Council's hands. As the highest form of government in Faerwyvae, consisting of every ruler from each court, only the biggest cases require their judgment. Most issues can be handled by the rulers of the court the crime was committed in. It's normally only legal scandals involving the royals themselves that require a verdict by the Alpha Council. Then again, Saint Lazaro has been on thin ice since the rebellions. I suppose it makes sense that any crime involving the brotherhood could be considered next to treason.

"If everyone thinks he's guilty, why wasn't he assassinated sooner?" I ask, and the question tightens my stomach. Do I believe he *should* have been assassinated sooner? Should he have been assassinated at all?

"Shortly after the executions, the boy's mother sent him to boarding school in Bretton. Probably to prevent further investigation that could prove her son's guilt. He's been living there ever since. There was no need to punish him further."

"But he came back?"

"Yes, to claim his inheritance," Nimue says with a sneer. "Astern Ariko's properties, gambling income, and estates were seized by the Alpha Council, but since he was the only one in his family found guilty of a crime, his will had to be honored where his son was concerned. He'd set aside a

sizable trust for Dorian's education as well as a hearty fortune for him to claim when he came of age. The money was most certainly earned from illegal betting income, but there was no proof. So the boy's inheritance was set aside, reserved for him to claim between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one. If he fails to claim it during that time, it becomes forfeit. No one expected him to return, for only a citizen can claim wealth and property on the isle. And once a human leaves Faerwyvae, they must reapply for citizenship unless express permission for short-term travel is given. Dorian, it seems, was most determined, for he'd scheduled an appointment to discuss said citizenship on Vanmar Island."

"Vanmar Island?" I echo, unfamiliar with the name.

"Oh, my child, you are sheltered, aren't you?" I narrow my eyes, but she only laughs. "It's one of the small, protected islands to the north, just outside the Lunar Court. It's used for conducting business with humans who have questionable citizenship, a way to process legal matters without allowing a human ashore the mainland."

"That's when his ship was attacked? When he was on his way to this island?" It makes sense, considering the wreck happened just west of Cape Vega. There's a small cluster of islands northwest of there, and I'm guessing Vanmar is one of them. The fae must have driven the ship off course, led it toward the cape instead. With a shudder, I wonder how many others had been on board. A captain, crew, perhaps others seeking citizenship. Others I didn't save.

"Yes, and had you not interfered, he never would have made it to shore. The fire should have been enough to guarantee there'd be no survivors."

"I tried to end him," Zara says, tone defensive, "but he attacked me. He smashed an oil lamp over my head and pushed me into the flames."

I glare at her. "I'd likely do the same if you were trying to assassinate me."

Zara rises and takes a step forward. "Don't speak like he didn't have it coming. The sea fae he killed wasn't just anyone. She was my sister. For three years she was kept in a cage in his father's cellar, shackled in iron—an illegal metal that you're probably too stupid to understand is lethal to faekind. The touch of it alone would have been torture. Being kept constantly cuffed in it would have caused a slow poisoning of her flesh. Endless agony. And that's not even half of it. She was forced to fight for her life night after night. Of all the fae Astern Ariko kept for his fighting ring,

she was the last survivor. She made it three years. And that…*boy*…killed her."

I'm torn between sympathy, disgust, and annoyance. The fate of her sister was undeserved indeed, but…I can't help feeling like there's so much more they aren't saying. If the fae was the last survivor in a brutal fighting ring, how did a ten-year-old boy take her down? Was he truly such a vicious beast at that young age? And how does this relate to me? I turn my attention back to Nimue. "What does any of this have to do with me not joining your merry band of assassins?"

"Patience, love," she says in an aggravatingly gentle voice. "Like I was saying, you interfered with something you knew nothing about. You aided the boy in coming to shore—"

"How do you even know that?"

She looks down at my clenched fist, the one holding the hair comb. "After your father finally confessed about your powers, I attuned all my Sisters with your essence so anyone could report back if they found you. After Zara recovered from Dorian's attack with fire, she sensed you. She found that comb. I'd already felt you in the ocean that night, so when she brought that comb back to me, I understood at once what happened. Still, I needed further proof. So I used your little trinket to create the enchantment that allowed Zara to track you. She followed your trail from the sea to the steps of Saint Lazaro and all over the city of Lumenas until she saw you herself. She watched as you returned again and again to the church, as if you were looking for something. Or someone."

I clench my jaw, hoping she can't see the blush burning my cheeks. Not that I'm ashamed. Why wouldn't I want to check in on my charge? I only wanted to know if he'd lived or died.

Nimue sighs. "Now all my efforts stand in peril because of you. Dorian Ariko has claimed sanctuary at the church, which is valid for fourteen days. And if you think hard enough, dear daughter, you can probably guess what happens next."

I shrug. "The terms of sanctuary end and you send the Sisters of the Black Eel to try and kill him once more?"

"Not quite, for he's already one step ahead. You may have noticed a certain sign outside the church. One that boasts a public spectacle featuring the handsome Brother Dorian's hunt for a fae bride."

“I noticed,” I say, shifting awkwardly from foot to foot before I remind myself to stay still. Aloof. Unconcerned.

“Did you notice the timeframe of the pageant? It ends just as his sanctuary expires and concludes with a wedding. If he marries a fae or half-fae bride, his citizenship is guaranteed. The Alpha Council will not sanction an assassination on a legitimate citizen, which means we only have ten more days to fix this mess you made. And *you* are going to do it.”

I stare blankly. “Me.”

“Yes.”

“You’re saying you want me to…kill him.”

“It seems you aren’t slow.”

Anger ignites within me. “I’m not going to kill him, Nimue. I’m not one of your assassins. Punish me if you like, threaten me all you dare. There’s nothing you can say that will convince me to do this. I’m not a heartless killer like you.” At least, that’s what Father believed. He believed it so much that he tried to help me. Tried to prevent this very fate I so stupidly brought upon myself.

Nimue rises from her throne and slithers over to me. When she speaks, her voice is cold. “I am a killer, my love, but that duty has been appointed to me by the Alpha Council. Each monarch has a part to play, and some of our roles are bigger than others. Queen Nyxia is known as a powerful cursemaker, responsible for doling out punishments in high-level legal cases. Queen Esther oversees scientific advancement in the Star Court. Your father is responsible for keeping trade routes safe for merchant ships. I too have my place. I dole out assassinations sanctioned by the Alpha Council. It’s not something I can argue with. Can you?”

I shudder at what she’s implying. The shipwreck wasn’t simply a reckless attack, but an assassination attempt approved by the Alpha Council. The very council my father belongs to. The vote would have had to be unanimous for such a risky assassination to be approved.

If my father believed Dorian needed to die…there must be a good reason.

Nimue’s face softens as she stops before me. “The boy is not innocent, my love. He’s already taken his father’s place in a church that hates the fae. He’s been inducted into the Order of Strength just like his father was. You must know that if he takes a fae bride, he will be cruel to her. She just might be his next victim.”

I swallow hard, my breaths growing shallow as I fight to process everything she's said. She was right about one thing—I've lived a sheltered life. Even though I've learned much since running away, I still don't know a ton about humans. Could I have saved a madman?

I shake the question from my mind and focus on one far more imminent. "You still haven't told me how this gets me free of you."

"If you do this one thing, this one kill, I'll let you go. Kill Dorian Ariko, and I'll release my claim on you. You won't have to join the Sisters. You can return home to your father. Better yet…" She pauses dramatically and tilts her head to the side. "I can make it so you never have to kill with your kiss again."

I'm stunned silent. Dread and longing fill my heart in equal measure, clashing into shivering convulsions as I consider such an impossible offer. There must be some trick. I try to will myself not to rise to her bait, not to ask the question poised on my lips. But it's no use. My curiosity bubbles up my chest to my throat, fueling my words. "Can you truly take away my magic?"

"I can make it so you never again have to fear your own kiss. I can enchant your lips so that your next kiss is the last that results in senseless, automatic death. From then on, you can kiss with love, with passion, with joy, and never harm a soul. But only if you do this one thing."

I run a hand through my hair, my eyes unfocused as I step away from her. "I…can't. If he's claimed sanctuary, he probably won't step foot outside the church."

"You don't have to worry about that. You're going to walk straight into the church and up to Dorian Ariko with permission."

"How?"

"You're going to compete to be his bride."

11

My body goes still as I stare at Queen Nimue with wide eyes. I couldn't possibly have heard her right. "Excuse me?"

"You will join the pageant and compete for his hand. The contest begins in three days, and you will deliver your kiss by sunrise seven days later."

I stammer, searching for words that will help me make sense of this ridiculous plan. "You want me to compete to be his bride—"

"Only as long as it takes to deliver your kiss."

"But you expect me to infiltrate the pageant and…what? Kiss him and make it obvious I killed him?"

Nimue chuckles. "It won't be obvious, my child. For I do suggest you deliver your kiss in private, especially if you can get him alone without leaving proof you'd been together. Contestants are required to remain guests at the church for the duration of the pageant or until they are eliminated, which means you'll have plenty of chances in the dark of night. But even if you were found to be with him when he died, there would be no evidence you'd caused his death. I saw what Zara looked like before I brought her back. She could have suffered any number of natural sudden ailments had I not known better. You could be inspected and prodded until you're blue in the face. There will be nothing to tie you to his death."

"I don't want to be inspected or prodded."

"Then do a proper job." Her voice comes out sharp. "I'm doing you a favor, Maisie. I've been waiting each day since you were born to discover you have magic like mine so I could get back the child I lost. Do you think I

like having to punish you at our first reunion? Do you think I make no sacrifice in my offer to you? I've agreed to release you, to release the claim that binds us."

I roll my eyes. "If you were truly doing me a favor, you wouldn't manipulate me into killing someone. That's why I've been running from you for a year. Because I don't want to be part of this." I gesture toward the Sisters, who snarl in reply. "I don't want to kill people."

Nimue comes closer and lowers her voice. "One more kiss, Maisie, and you'll never have to kill anyone again. You can finally kiss someone for love."

Love. The very thing I swore I'd never get to have. Can I accept her offer? Kill a man in exchange for freedom from my horrible magic? My life could be so different. If Nimue truly releases her claim on me as her subject, I wouldn't have to run anymore. I could go home to Father. I could travel the isle without having to hide or steal. I could go on adventures and see what I've been missing my whole life. I could…fall in love.

But first, I'd have to kill the man I saved.

Can I do that?

I lift my chin. "What if I say no?"

"Then you remain a subject of my court and will be bound to follow my orders, which might very well include induction into the Sisters of the Black Eel. And, yes, you could try to run away, but what I said earlier remains. You will be dead in ten days unless you obey me. Only I can revoke the curse I've laid upon you. Trust me, my love, when I say I have every intention of seeing you live a very long and happy life."

I step back from her, torn between indignation and helplessness. On every side of me lies an impossible outcome. On one, I'm free but must kill a man. On another, I become the tool of a monster. Or I choose death. My heart hammers so hard against my ribs I fear it could explode.

"One kiss, Maisie," Nimue says, her voice as soft as tiny waves lapping upon the shore. "That's all I demand. One kiss and the death of a dangerous man."

Resignation tugs my bones, making me feel heavy, tired. Lost. My voice comes out small. "I don't even know if I can join the competition. What if they already have enough contestants?"

Nimue's lips curl into a satisfied grin, one that makes bile rise into my throat. "You've already entered."

“What? How?”

Movement catches my attention and I see Zara’s scales flicker from scalp to foot. As they settle, a glamour takes their place, one that leaves her looking like…me. Aside from the hideously puffy pink dress, of course. Other than that, the likeness is disturbingly uncanny. She clasps her hands at her chest and plasters a simpering smile over her—*my*—lips. “Oh, I would so love to participate in the pageant,” she says in a voice that almost sounds like my own. “I’m the one who rescued him after all. Did you know that? I fell in love with him the moment I saw him.”

I gasp, heat burning my cheeks, and not just because of the offensive impersonation. “You can lie.”

“It’s what makes her so valuable to me. A cuttlefish sprite can not only don glamours that expertly mimic another person, but—so long as she’s acting as someone else—she can lie.”

“If she can impersonate anyone, why am I needed at all?”

“Because this is your mistake to fix,” Nimue says. “You owe your allegiance to me now, and I will treat you the way I’d treat any of the Sisters. You interfered with a mission, so you will set it right.”

“I only rescued him because he was already in the ocean. He wouldn’t have survived if Zara had properly done her job in the first place. Am I wrong?”

Zara opens her mouth, sharp teeth bared, but Nimue holds up a hand to still her.

“You will do this, daughter. The truth remains that he would have drowned had you not escorted him across the border.” She extends a hand toward me. “Do we have a bargain?”

I bark a laugh. “I may be sheltered but I know better than to agree to a bargain before finalizing its terms.”

She gives me an approving smile. “Very good. Here are my terms. You will enter the pageant under the guise of competing for Dorian Ariko’s hand with the goal to end his life. You will deliver your kiss before sunrise ten days from now, before he can wed a fae bride. In addition, I will enchant your lips so that your next kiss will be the last that must cause death. If you succeed at killing Dorian Ariko, I will release my claim on you as both your mother and your queen and will return your sealskin to you.”

When she says nothing more, I give her a pointed look. “And if I fail. I want to hear that part too.”

Another approving grin. She's testing me, and I hate her for it. "If you fail to deliver the kiss and Dorian Ariko still lives by the first sunrise after his sanctuary expires, the curse I've laid upon you will take you. The terms of the curse are as follows. Any human clothing you wear will burn up, as will any other sealskin but your own."

Panic laces through me. Selkies can't survive in seelie form during daylight hours unless they don human clothing or return to their sealskin. Otherwise, they die. Not even hiding in the ocean can save a selkie from such a fate. Their lives remain forfeit in the sea, but as they die, they turn to seafoam. Because of this, I'm never fully naked during daylight, not even to bathe or change clothing. I always have at least one small article on at a time.

Fury flashes inside me, rising like a tidal wave. "You're cursing me even if I agree to your bargain? Broken bargains result in death for the fae as it is. Shouldn't that be enough?"

Nimue reveals not a hint of shame. "My curse will remain in tandem with our bargain. I promise, though, if you succeed, I will meet you at Cape Vega before sunrise ten days from now. There I will revoke your curse and return your sealskin. If you fail, well, I expect you there regardless so you can explain yourself to me. Now, do you agree to this bargain? If not, you are still my subject and must remain with me. You could, of course, gamble the next ten days away and try to please me enough that I revoke your curse and let you live. Then your deadly magic remains to you as it is now, and you can start getting to know your new Sisters."

My fury shifts into sorrow as the weight of the bargain presses on my shoulders. "Murder, death, or become an assassin. Those are my only options."

"They are fair options," Nimue says.

I shake my head. "What do you know about fair?"

Her expression hardens but she makes no retort. Instead, she holds out her hand again, waiting for me to seal our deal.

"I hate you," I say through my teeth.

"Good. Direct that anger toward Dorian Ariko. He's the real reason you're here, isn't it? I'll ask you once more. Do you agree to this bargain?"

My lungs feel like they're being squeezed by iron, and my throat burns with resentment. But what other options do I have? This bargain offers me my only chance at a normal life.

All I have to do is kill a dangerous man.

With a deep breath, I grasp the queen's hand. My next words feel like broken shells on my tongue. "I agree to this bargain."

With the spectacle over, Nimue dismisses the Sisters. Once we're alone, she turns to me with a wide grin. Not one brimming with motherly approval but something else. A sickening false kindness. A childlike excitement. "We'll need to prepare you to look your best. Come, dear daughter, I have the finest suite ready for you and ample dresses to choose from." She begins to slither away, but I make no move to follow.

"What makes you think I'm going to stay here a minute longer?"

She turns back to face me with a furrowed brow as if she can't comprehend my words. After a moment of silent scrutiny, a corner of her mouth lifts in a smirk. "You can't join the pageant looking like that."

I resist the urge to glance down at my baggy linen shirt and dingy trousers. Instead, I hold her gaze. "I can prepare for the mission on my own. Where's the door?"

"Why should I let you leave?" she asks with a pout. I expect malice in her tone, but there is none.

"Why shouldn't you? You have no risk in letting me return to Lumenas. If I fail my mission, your curse will kill me. If I don't join the contest, I break our bargain, and *that* will kill me. My only valid option is to kill the man and complete my task."

"But you just got here." She closes the distance between us and gathers my hands in hers. I'm too tired, too empty to fight her off. She squeezes my limp fingers, then gently takes the hair comb from my hand. With an unsettling tenderness, she brushes one side of my hair behind my ear. I flinch at her touch but remain in place as she pins my hair back with the shell comb. "Allow me to dote on you. You're my only daughter, Maisie."

"It seems like you have plenty with your Sisters of the Black Eel. And they actually seem to like you, unlike me."

Her lips flick between a smile and a frown. "You shouldn't be this old. You should still be a baby."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

“I thought we had more time. I thought you’d manifest magic when you were still small and I’d get the chance to raise you.”

I let out a dark laugh. “Father said you snarled at me the moment I was born and refused to even hold me.”

Her expression falls before she hardens it behind a stoic mask. “I told you about the bargain I made with your father. If you were born a seal, I would turn you over to him. If anything else, you’d be mine. Every child your father ever sired was born exactly like him, no matter who their mother was, but still, I held out hope. I could feel in my womb that you were like me. You were mine in every way. Then you came out the way you did, with gray fur and flippers. I admit, I felt betrayed by you. Betrayed by the child I thought I already knew so well. The truth, though, is I was heartbroken, knowing I had to give you up. And yet, I never relinquished hope. I knew someday you would prove to have magic like mine, magic your father wants nothing to do with. That’s why he agreed to let me have you, should you prove to be like me. He knew he wouldn’t be able to live with having a daughter who wielded such dark magic. The very idea disgusted him.”

I shake my head, Father’s words echoing through it. *She won’t stop until she makes you one of her assassins. I can’t live with that. You’re not a killer, my child. I can’t see you made a murderer…*

She’s wrong about him. That’s not what he meant when he said he couldn’t live with me being a killer. Father loved me. He loves me still. He took the blame for Luther’s death and did everything he could to protect me from Nimue. Not because my dark magic disgusted him, but because… because… “You know nothing about my father.”

She opens her mouth but snaps it shut, as if reconsidering her words. “I know I shouldn’t speak ill of your hero, so I won’t. What matters is I was right about you all along. You *are* like me. Now I can be the mother I always wanted to be.”

“You mean, now you can threaten me with death and force me to kill.” I cross my arms and take a step back from her. “You may have claim to me as your subject, but you’re no mother of mine and never will be.”

12

Nimue's chest heaves as she watches me with a stormy expression. I fear she might lash out at me, punish me for my insubordination, but I'm too angry to care. Silence stretches between us while I hold her gaze with defiance. Then her rage slips away and the cold mask of the Killer Queen returns. "Very well, Maisie. If you are determined to prepare for the pageant on your own, I will take you straight to Cape Vega."

"I'll find my own way. Just direct me to the shore."

She scoffs. "Why, so you can run to your father?"

I tighten my jaw. That *was* my plan. I thought I could at least visit my father and brothers before returning to Lumenas. Maybe Father would tell me Nimue is wrong about her powers, that he has every ability to remove the curse she placed on me.

Then I remind myself my bargain has already been secured, and fae bargains are binding. It's too late to go back. Too late to hope I can be saved. I must kill Dorian. There's also the matter of my parents' bargain. They agreed I'd be Nimue's subject if I manifested dark magic.

Father can do nothing for me now.

"Fine," I say. "Take me back."

Nimue reaches into the pouch hanging from her belt and retrieves the silver compact.

"What is that?" I ask.

"It's called a Chariot. It's rare fae technology that allows instantaneous travel. It was invented around the time when the first fae war ended. It's too

dangerous to fall into casual use, so the Alpha Council allows very few royals to own these."

"And somehow they thought it prudent that you should have one?"

She smirks. "They don't exactly know. Let's just say I went to great lengths to have this stolen."

"If you have something as powerful as that, I don't understand why you can't use it right now to transport yourself to this Dorian boy and end him."

"I already told you. This is your mess to fix. Besides, there are limitations to this technology. One can only use it to travel to a place one can physically see or has personally been. One must envision the place in their mind's eye. Furthermore, it can only be used twice before it must be charged with starlight. This, of course, means I'll be returning home the long way after I take you to Cape Vega, since Zara already used this to bring you to me."

I frown. "That is quite a complicated contraption."

"Yes, and don't even think about trying to steal it from me or I'll cut off your hands. Come. Stand close." With a glower, I do as I'm told. Nimue places one hand on my forearm. "We must be touching to travel together." With the other hand, she flips open the compact. Like when Zara opened it, a light begins to glow brighter and brighter until it's blinding. I close my eyes and again feel a strange humming that reverberates through my bones. When it stops, the sound of waves fills my ears. I open my eyes and find myself on the narrow shore at Cape Vega. Nimue releases my arm and I look up at the sky. It's as dark as it was when Podaxis and I returned to the Vulture's Prose, speckled with stars, a strange contrast from the warm glow of the throne room. I feel like an eternity has passed since Zara captured me, but I suppose it couldn't have been longer than an hour.

An hour that changed everything.

"I have one more enchantment to place upon you," Nimue says.

"What do you mean?" I ask, shoulders tensing.

"You want me to hold up my end of the bargain, don't you? If you want me to make it so you never have to kill again, you must give me permission to alter your magic."

I recoil at the thought of letting her use her magic on me again, but I remind myself it's what I want. Ridding me of my lethal power is the one good thing her magic can do for me. I shift from foot to foot. "You promise this will remove my dark power?"

“I promise that your next kiss will be the last that forces you to kill.”

With a deep breath, I nod. “Fine. Do it.”

She closes her eyes and steps closer. I flinch as she lifts her hand to my face, then presses her fingertip to my mouth. Like before, she begins to sing. As soon as she does, my lips start to tingle. When her song ends, the sensation remains. She steps back and I touch my mouth.

“Why does it feel like this?”

“It’s powerful magic,” she says, tone grave, “but it will end as soon as you deliver your kiss.”

The tangible reminder that I made a deal with the Sea Witch sends my stomach roiling.

“May your mission go well,” Nimue says in a formal tone. “Whether you succeed or not, I’ll meet you here at sunrise the morning after the contest ends.”

I nod and turn around.

“What, no hug for your mother?”

Ignoring her, I continue to walk away from the rocky shore until I reach the side of the bluff. From there, I climb. I don’t look back at the sea until I’ve reached the top. When I do, I’m startled to find Nimue still on the shore, watching me. Then, with a wave and a smile, she dives into the sea.

I FEEL LIKE A LIVING CORPSE BY THE TIME I MAKE IT HOME TO THE Vulture’s Prose. My limbs feel heavy, my heart weighed down with iron. Sleep calls me with every step I take, but as soon as I make it to my bedroom door, I’m bombarded by two voices.

“Where have you been?” Podaxis says as he and Nadia tear down the hall toward me. I stifle a groan. Podaxis stares up at me with worry in his eyes, tapping his claws together.

Nadia looks indignant. And stunning. She’s dressed in a red silk floral robe, her short black hair set with pins that I’ve seen transform her coiffure into the most elegant waves come morning. I’ve always been jealous of her hair. It’s a little shorter than mine, cut just above her jaw, yet hers never looks as wild as my pink tresses. She puts her hands on her hips and looks me up and down. “Podaxis said you went to speak with Martin in your

room, but when he next came to check on you, you were both gone. Martin came to invite us to the Honey House a half-hour ago and said he'd been working the card tables before that and hasn't spoken to you all night. What's going on? We've both been worried sick."

I try to laugh off her concern. Nadia and I have never been close friends. I always considered her more Podaxis' friend than anything. Was she truly worried? "It's just a misunderstanding."

Podaxis lifts his claws in frustration. "How is that a misunderstanding, Pearl? I saw Martin with my own eyes, while he claims I saw no such thing."

"It isn't what you think, and it's not important right now."

He taps his hind claws. "Oh, I say it's important. Do explain."

"I will tell you all the details later," I say slowly, giving him a pointed look that I hope communicates what I can't say out loud.

Podaxis huffs but makes no further argument.

Nadia looks from me to Podaxis, eyes narrowed with suspicion. "If you don't want me to hear it, just say so. I only wish I'd known you were fine before I spent the last hour running down the streets of Lumenas in my bathrobe."

"Did you really?"

"She did," Podaxis says, and I catch a subtle brightening of his mushrooms.

I'm moved by how much Nadia seems to have cared. It makes me want to give her something in return, even if it's only a fraction of the truth. "It's just…this has nothing to do with Martin. It really was a misunderstanding, all right? All I can tell you is, well, I'm going to compete for a young man's hand in a bridal pageant."

Nadia's brow wrinkles with confusion. "And you had to disappear for over an hour to make it so?"

I hesitate to form words that are true. "Podaxis wouldn't have approved," I finally say.

He gasps. "Don't you dare tell me you've joined that competition to marry Brother Dorian. That's a very, very bad idea, Pearl, and you know it."

"Why is that a bad idea?" Nadia asks. "If Pearl wants to find love, shouldn't you be happy for her?" She glances between us, then her expression falls. "Unless…are the two of you an item?"

"No!" I say with horror.

“Repulsive,” Podaxis says. “She’s like a sister to me.”

Nadia shrugs. “Then what’s the problem, my little crab?”

I expect Podaxis to rail at being called a crab, but of course, he does nothing but smile back at Nadia. “No problem, I suppose.”

“Then let us celebrate. But, please, dear Pearl, do tell me you aren’t joining the competition wearing anything like that.” She scowls at my outfit with even more disdain than my mother showed.

I release a heavy sigh. “Do you happen to have some clothes I can borrow?”

“These bridal pageants really are all the rage on Salvation Street, aren’t they?” Nadia says as she rifles through trunks of fabric. She sets a few pieces of silk aside and moves to a rack that holds several gowns in varying styles. We’re in the theater’s dressing room, which boasts a vast array of eclectic costumes, many that were made by Nadia herself. Or, more accurately, altered from clothes that had been discarded around town or left behind at hotels and brothels. We have a working relationship with several establishments that sell us used garments at a discount.

I wrinkle my nose as Nadia holds out a flamboyant red dress. “No?” she says, then returns it to the rack.

Perhaps I was wrong to seek her help. We don’t exactly have the same taste in fashion. As the resident aerialist, her outfits tend to be tight-fitting sequined leotards, while I’m perfectly at home in menswear. Still, I’ve seen some of the fine gowns she’s stitched together for the theater’s performers. There must be something here I can wear.

“Did you see the sign with the milliner last week?” She lets out a low whistle. “He was quite handsome, wasn’t he? What church did you say your soon-to-be-beloved belongs to?”

I’d given her only the barest details about the upcoming pageant, much to Podaxis’ great annoyance. I could tell he was dying to hear the full story. He looked like he was going to explode when Nadia suggested he give us some privacy to sort through clothes together, and I’m sure he’s waiting in my room right now, tapping his little claws with impatience.

“Saint Lazaro,” I say.

She grimaces but turns it into a smile last minute. “Oh, yes. Saint Lazaro. They’re quite notorious, aren’t they?”

“I know they don’t have the best reputation with the fae,” I say, feigning enthusiasm, “but Brother Dorian is seeking a fae bride. Don’t you think that means he admires my kind?”

“Mmhmm,” she mumbles unconvincingly. Nadia is human so she can lie without issue. She holds up a blue wool skirt and sets it aside with the silk, then tosses a white lace blouse over the top of it. “I suppose they want to show the world they’ve changed,” she says. “That’s why so many churches have started hosting pageants. It proves they’re fun and modern and tricks people into joining their congregation.” She snorts a laugh but cuts off. “Oh, I’m not making fun, Pearl dear. If you fancy a man of the church, I support you all the way. How many outfits do you think you’ll need?”

“The pageant lasts for seven days, but I doubt I’ll be there that long,” I say.

She gives me a perplexed look. “You hold no hope that you’ll win?”

I shrug.

She tilts her head, shoulders sinking. “If this is something you want to do, then why do you look so sad about it?”

Again, I must search for an answer that isn’t a lie. “I, well…I won’t be able to work for Mr. Tuttle during the pageant. I must remain a guest at the church during the competition. I doubt I’ll have time to gather *found treasures*.”

She waves a dismissive hand. “He’ll understand. Mr. Tuttle has always been supportive of us bettering our lives. Perhaps a little too supportive. You might have noticed how many performers come and go from under this roof. It’s only a handful of us who’ve been here since it opened. But we’ll all be happy for you if you win, and we’ll welcome you back if you don’t.”

“I’ll…I’ll miss the theater if I win.” It’s true. I’ve grown fond of my little makeshift home this past year. Once my mission is complete, I’ll be free to go anywhere I please. While I’m excited at the prospect of unhindered travel, the theater has become a comfort to me. I’m not even sure I’ll want to leave it. Then again, freedom from Nimue means I won’t have to hide anymore. I’ll no longer need a fake name. I can be Princess Maisie. I can go anywhere, do anything. Does a princess belong at a fledgling theater?

“Oh,” she says with clear surprise. “I wasn’t sure you liked this place or any of us much.”

A pang of guilt strikes me. I never meant to make anyone at the theater think I didn’t like them, especially Nadia. It’s more that I’ve avoided making close friends. With as many secrets as I have…well, it just didn’t seem right.

“What about this?” Nadia holds up a shimmering gown. It’s made of sheer, iridescent silk in pale pink, blue, and white, reminding me of a dazzling opal. It’s sleeveless with thin straps of pearl. I can’t quite tell by the way it drapes from the hanger, but it doesn’t seem to have a back. If it does, it’s very low. “I’ve been working on this for weeks. It’s in the fae style. You know, no extraneous fabric, lots of places to reveal skin. It should suit you beautifully.”

I shake my head. “I’m impressing a man of the church, not working the Orchid Garden.”

She shakes her hips. “You think religious men are above earthly desires? If you wear this, you’ll win. Trust me.”

I don’t need to win, I say to myself. *I need to kill*. What I say out loud is, “I’ll think on it and come back if I change my mind. For now, let’s just plan on three days of clothes. Modest ones.”

She shakes her head and returns the dress to the rack. “Pessimistic Pearl. Very well.”

After Nadia finishes picking out my clothes—and insisting she be allowed to alter them to fit me perfectly before the pageant starts—I return to my room. Sure enough, Podaxis is there, hounding after my heels as I make my way across the floor. All I want to do is sink to the floor and lie under my sealskin. But I can’t. It’s gone, and I won’t get it back until I succeed at my mission. So I sink onto my bed and stare up at the ceiling instead.

Podaxis crawls up the mattress next to me. “Maisie, I can’t take it anymore. What really happened? Why are you joining that ridiculous contest?”

My answer comes out small. Weak. “She found me, Podaxis.”

“Who?”

“You know who. Nimue. My mother.”

He shrinks down at the sound of her name. “Oh, no. What does that mean?”

A tear slips from the corner of my eye and trickles down the side of my face. I wish I could just close my eyes and forget the last couple hours ever happened. But Podaxis is my best friend. My brother. He deserves the truth.

I tell him everything.

13

As the next days pass, I spend much of my time pacing my bedroom, working hard at convincing myself I'm doing the right thing. Not only for myself but the good of Faerwyvae. Just because the boy I saved didn't prove to be a masked murderer overnight doesn't mean I didn't do something terrible by letting him on the isle. And if the assassination was truly sanctioned by the Alpha Council…shouldn't I trust their judgment? The man killed a fae, after all. He may have been ten years of age, but his victim had been caged in a cellar, cuffed in iron, and forced to fight for three years. Could it really have been in self-defense? She was stabbed seven times. He was drenched in her blood.

When logic fails to take the burden from my heart, I focus on the selfish reasons for doing what I'm about to do. After one kiss, I'll be free to have whatever kind of life I desire, to live anywhere I please. I can go back to see Father—

Thoughts of him twist my heart. I'm still not sure how to feel after my talk with Nimue. Why didn't he tell me about his bargain with her? Could there be any truth to what she insinuated? That he bargained me away because the thought of having a deadly daughter disgusted him?

No, I refuse to believe that. Even so, the questions plague my mind as the days draw closer to the start of the contest. Time and time again while I'm pacing my room, I debate picking up pen and paper and writing Father a letter. But I can't bring myself to do it. I've resisted communicating with him ever since I ran away for fear that my letters could be intercepted. Now

that I've been found by Nimue, there's no need to hide. I *should* write to him. If not to ask him my questions, then at least to tell him I'm safe.

Then I'd also have to confess she's found me. That it was all my fault. That I've agreed to kill for her.

When these realizations strike, I deem it better to wait until the deed is done, until I can confidently say I'm free of her, that I'll never have to kill again. That's when I'll write.

Until then, one kiss is all that stands between me and freedom. One life ended, and mine can finally begin.

Morning dawns on the first day of the bridal competition. I try to keep my more hopeful thoughts fixed firmly in my mind while I make my way from the Vulture's Prose to Salvation Street. It doesn't take long before I'm cursing under my breath as I'm forced to navigate dainty steps in the heeled walking shoes Nadia managed to find for me. I much prefer my flat-soled leather boots that I normally wear but Nadia would hear none of it. Instead, she all but shoved me into the narrow black shoes and ordered me to leave my boots behind. In the large carpet bag I carry is another pair—silk dancing slippers—as well as my freshly altered clothes. Nadia nearly fainted when I insisted everything fit into a single bag that I'd be carrying myself. The best part was when she tried to get Podaxis to shift into his seelie form and act as my servant. *I often wonder what you look like in seelie form*, she mused this morning as she assessed Podaxis from under her lashes, resulting in much incomprehensible stammering from my friend.

Thank the shells Nadia has no clue I'm a princess. She would have employed every actor we know in making my presentation to the church. In the end, I insisted on no fanfare and my single carpet bag of belongings.

"I can't believe we're really doing this," Podaxis says. He's tucked under one arm while I clutch my bag in the other. "Are you sure they'll even let me inside?"

"Why wouldn't they?"

"I'm not competing."

"Well, I can't bear to do this without you, so you're going to be whatever they let me bring. You'll be a statue of my nonexistent great-uncle George if you must."

"I don't see how my presence is supposed to help you at all."

I shrug. "I might need help spying. Or…you know. Just a friend."

“Once again pulling the best-friend card when it’s the least convenient for me,” he mutters.

We reach Salvation Street and already I’m a sweating mess. Whether it’s from anxiety, the weight of my overfull bag, or the discomfort of walking in heels and a stuffy corset, I know not. All I know is not even the sugary sweet aroma of Lumies beckoning from across the street manages to soothe my nerves. Although, for a moment I am tempted to just throw this whole plan overboard and gorge myself on sweets until I’m blissfully unconscious. The notion only lasts a second, though, because I know what’s at stake.

My life.

As I reach Saint Lazaro, I once again find a crowd out front. A group of men and women hover about the sign and try to steal glances inside the church. The front doors remain open, but there’s nothing to see from the sidewalk, especially with the man standing in the doorway. He wears the same robes as the priest I spoke to the night I rescued Dorian. What was his name…Father Viktor? This man, however, is not he. He’s several inches taller and twice as wide.

With a deep breath, I stride up the stairs and approach him. “I’m here for the pageant.”

He assesses me with a penetrating stare. I can’t tell whether he’s pleased or repulsed, although the latter is the most expected, considering the church’s reputation. As he continues to stare at me, I realize I recognize that leering gaze. It’s Brother Billius from the previous sign, the one whose contest never had the chance to begin. The black-and-white photograph may have done him a favor, for he isn’t much improved in full color. His hair is thin and sandy brown, eyes watery and blue. His round belly is probably the only thing I like about him. “The Blessing Ceremony is open for the public, but it isn’t until tomorrow evening,” he says in a slightly nasal tone.

I furrow my brow. “No, you misunderstand me. I’m competing in the bridal contest.”

Brother Billius’ eyes widen with surprise. A blush heats his round cheeks as he assesses me a second time, taking in everything from my dress to my bag and shoes. When his gaze returns to mine, he retrieves a leather notebook and pen from within his robes. “So sorry, you don’t look quite like the others. May I have your name, dear child of the Almighty?”

I open my mouth to answer but stop myself. Should I go by Pearl or Maisie? Zara is the one who signed me up for this madness. Does she know about my alias? If so, would she have used it?

I gulp. "Maisie."

Billius scans his notebook, then asks, "Surname?"

This takes me aback, and I blink at him a few times. "I don't have a surname."

"Why not?"

Trying not to let my irritation show, I turn my head to the side so he can see the pointed tips of my ears just below my shell comb. "I'm full fae. Surnames are a human practice, everyone knows this." Even I do, and I spent most of my life as a seal.

"I'm sorry, dear child, but I can only find a Maisie Halfwit on my list."

"Halfwit!" I echo. My cheeks burn and I regret not having punched Zara in the face when I had the chance. "That's obviously not my name."

He grimaces. "Identification then?"

Again, I'm at a loss.

"Passport, residency card?"

Are other fae known to possess these things? If I ever had either, I left them behind when I fled.

With a sigh, Billius closes his notebook and clasps it at his waist. "If you can't prove your identity, we cannot allow you inside."

My mind spins to conjure a solution. He can't send me away. If I were a real princess—

Well, I *am* a real princess. Not that I was raised like the fancy royals the theaters put on plays about. Being the daughter of a king never seemed significant to me growing up. Not when I was the youngest of many siblings, none of which seemed all that regal either.

But still…

I force myself to stand a little straighter and arrange my features into what I hope looks haughty. The next words that leave my lips are ones I haven't dared utter aloud since I ran away. "I am Princess Maisie, daughter of King Ronan of the Sea Court. The fact that I just said so shall be proof enough, for fae can't lie. Brother Dorian *is* seeking a fae bride is he not?"

He tilts his head to the side, and I can't tell if he's looking at me with suspicion or fascination. "You're a fae princess?"

"I said as much already. Would you make me repeat myself?"

He blushes again, but the smile remains. “Forgive my offenses, dear child of the Almighty, but you say you’re a fae princess, yet you come here alone with a single bag. Where are your lady’s maids?”

I glance around in an exaggerated manner. “How many other princesses are here? Do they have lady’s maids in attendance?”

“You’re the only royal.” He clears his throat and adds, “Your Highness. Regardless, most of the others came with a chaperone at the very least.”

I try not to scoff at the word *chaperone*. Lumenas may be a little more lax when it comes to propriety and the rules of gentle society, but I should have known a church would be more likely to support old-fashioned ways. Well, if they insist I have a chaperone…

I lift Podaxis a little higher under my arm. “I have him.”

“Oh, don’t bring me into this,” my friend murmurs as he tries to rotate away from the man. “I was doing just fine being a statue.”

“*Him*?” Billius places a hand over his heart as if I just swore on his dear Almighty. “A male companion as your chaperone? Please tell me he’s at least your brother.”

“Adopted brother, yes,” I say in a rush. It’s true enough for me to state out loud. Father may not have officially adopted Podaxis when he brought the orphaned creature home, but I consider him as close to a brother as one gets. “If my father—the Seelie King of the Sea, need I remind you—considers Podaxis a fine enough companion, then you should too.”

“I apologize,” he says, offering an awkward bow. Then he flips open his notebook and furiously scrawls something over the paper. “Princess Maisie, daughter of King Ronan, I have you checked in. Please enter and have a seat with the other contestants.”

With another bow, he turns to the side. I try to keep my head held high and brush past him, but before I clear the threshold, a flurry of whispers erupts behind me. A glance over my shoulder shows the crowd on the sidewalk has grown since I’ve been talking with Billius. A dozen pairs of eyes watch me as they smile behind their hands and exchange words amongst themselves. I catch tittering strains of *princess* and *male companion* before I return to facing forward.

“Shells,” I mutter as I rush through the doorway and into the antechamber. “That was not an impression I cared to make. People are gossiping about me. There goes all hope that I could do this without word getting out that a princess of the Sea Court was here.”

Podaxis shrugs a claw. “Perhaps they’ll forget about you.”

I cross the antechamber and pass through to the next threshold. As soon as I clear it, I’m assaulted by a bright light and a popping sound. I stifle a shout. My first thought is of my mother’s Chariot device, for the glow is nearly as blinding. But as it fades, my view is replaced by a bespectacled human man dressed in a tweed suit and bowler hat. He holds a large boxlike contraption with a lens and bellows in one hand and a metal wand topped in an orb of pale light in the other. The orb reminds me of the lights inside Nimue’s palace. They’re the same kind Father had inside Bircharbor—fae lighting technology. The man must have done something to make the light flare because now it’s nothing more than a soft glow. I’ve seen cameras around the city before, but not one small enough to be carried around in such a way, and certainly never up close. Now that I’ve become personally acquainted with the device, I can safely say I dislike it.

“Contestant Six,” he says with a smile as if he hadn’t just visually assaulted me. “I’m Sam Sputnik. I’ll be the resident photographer for the duration of the contest.”

Another figure comes up beside him, a fae male with pointed ears, white freckles, vibrant orange hair, and a thin curled mustache. He wears a lime-green suit, and where his trousers end, I see dainty deer hooves. “Glint McCreedy,” he says, scrawling in his notebook while he looks at me. I take it he’s a reporter. And apparently has a surname. He nods to the right. “Will you stand just a little to the side?”

I take a few steps forward with the intent to walk away completely, but the light flares again, freezing me in place. I blink the glare from my eyes and find Glint McCreedy still scribbling away over his paper, brow furrowed as his eyes flick from me to the paper and back again.

“Will you stop?” I say through my teeth.

“We need your portrait, miss,” Sam Sputnik says.

“And I need to jot down every detail of that outfit,” Mr. McCreedy adds, though his tone suggests he isn’t overly impressed.

Mr. Sputnik lifts his flash bulb. “I suggest we take another—”

With a huff, I turn away only to come face to face with a boy who looks a few years younger than me, dressed in a simple black robe. “May I take your bag?”

I’m too overwhelmed to do anything but hand it over. “Fine.”

“And this?” He lifts his free hand toward Podaxis, but I take a step back. His eyes widen as if he only now sees that what I carry isn’t another bag. He snatches his hand back just as another flash of the bulb illuminates the side of my face. “Saint Lazaro’s Holy Fire, what is that?” the boy asks.

I press Podaxis to my chest before my friend tries to snip the boy’s fingers. “None of your concern.” With that, I stalk away, prepared to curse the next person who even tries to talk to me before I can gather my bearings.

Luckily, no one else interrupts me and I’m allowed to take in my surroundings. I’m in the room I’d glimpsed the first night I came here, a carpeted aisle flanked by pews. I suppose this is whatever the churchy part of a church is called. It’s quiet and sparsely populated. The light is dim with only stained-glass windows and the open door behind me to let in the daylight. The walls are pale while the pews and beams overhead are of dark wood. At the front, I see an altar set with cloth, candles, and a small brazier in which burns a small but steady fire. Behind it is a relief carved in wood of angels, cherubs, several toothy animals, and at the center, a man with his hands outstretched, his feet buried in flames. This must be the famed Saint Lazaro the church is so fond of. I keep expecting to see something sinister lurking in the shadows—iron shackles, a poorly concealed torture device hanging from the rafters—but there’s nothing. Just like the outside of the church, the inside is modest. Benign. Not what I expected from a church with such a violent reputation.

I turn my attention to the pews and see the frontmost are occupied by what I assume to be the other contestants. On one side of the aisle sit six girls, two in each pew, and on the other I find three more. Two sit together while the third sits a row back, alone. I’m guessing the couples are the contestants with their chaperones, and I’m relieved to see at least one other came without a female companion. Each girl sits silent and demure. A couple heads turn my way, and one even smiles, but for the most part, the reception is as chilly as a midnight sea.

I choose the empty pew between the two occupied ones and do my best to sit like a lady. It takes all my restraint not to fuss and fidget with my clothes. I haven’t been this over-layered since Father sent me to try and woo the Lunar Prince. Nadia dressed me in full undergarments this morning—silk hose, a linen chemise, petticoats, and a stiff corset—followed by a green tartan walking skirt and a white lace blouse with ridiculous puffed

sleeves. The shirt is buttoned all the way to the top, unlike how I prefer to wear my menswear, and an emerald-green silk necktie forms a neat bow at my collar. It's a miracle I can even breathe. Tucking a finger beneath the necktie, I try to tug it a little lower—

"Stop fidgeting," Podaxis whispers. He sits next to me on the pew. Although, despite his admonition, he doesn't seem comfortable either. His beady eyes dart around, front claws clacking nervously together.

"Can I at least take off my gloves?"

"No! You heard Nadia. Gloves are required in formal situations."

"Is this formal?"

He hesitates. "How should I know?"

I glance around. From what I can see, the other girls wear gloves too. "Clam blasted rules of propriety," I mutter.

One of the two women in the pew before me whirls around with a curious expression. I catch sight of dark eyes in a heart-shaped face before she turns her gaze to Podaxis. Her hair is dark and pinned beneath a green hat decorated with white peonies. A sweet smile warms her expression as she turns more fully toward us. "You were so clever," she says in the type of voice one normally only hears east of Third. A snob, then. When I say nothing, she adds, "To bring a pet, that is."

Podaxis gasps. "A pet!"

"Actually, he's a person," I say.

She ignores us both. "Father bought me a pixie fennec last week and I so badly wanted to fight harder to bring her. But arguing is a sin, as we both know." She looks at me gravely, as if I'm supposed to understand a word she just said. I know nothing about sin, and I know even less about whatever the shells a pixie fennec is. I know a fennec is a type of fox, but where does the pixie part come in? Is she talking about something that's actually a fae creature—*a person*—or is it just a smaller variety of the animal?

I'm not even certain I want to know the answer.

"I'm Vanessa Courter," she says, not bothering to introduce her chaperone, an older woman with brown hair sprinkled with gray. When I don't reply, she asks, "And you are?'

"Maisie."

"What church are you from?"

"I'm not from a church."

She shrinks back slightly. “I see. But you are a follower of the Almighty, are you not?”

I shift uncomfortably in my seat, this time more irritated by the girl than my clothes. “I was raised to believe in the All of All and the magic of the Twelfth Court.”

“You’re pagan then.” I can tell by the change in her tone that she considers it a bad thing. Even her chaperone casts a disdainful glance over her shoulder. “Oh, and you’re full fae. I can tell by your ears.”

I look to hers and find only rounded corners. “Aren’t you at least half fae to be a contestant?”

She lifts her chin. “My mother is fae, but she was born seelie and never once shifted into her carnal form.”

Carnal form? I snort a laugh, which she pays no heed to.

“She entered society as soon as the isle was unified, so we are quite civilized.”

“How…nice,” I say.

“Do you seek salvation then? Is that why you wish to marry Brother Dorian?”

“Salvation?” This conversation is getting less and less pleasant by the second.

Excitement lights in the girl’s eyes. “Turning away from magic is the only way to reach salvation and temper the wicked nature of the fae. Marriage to a man of the church can turn one of fae blood toward the light and away from darkness. Of course, I come not from Saint Lazaro but The Church of Bretton. That was the first religion that came to Faerwyvae, you know. The fae were nothing but beasts before humans first discovered the isle. It was human influence that made them better and smarter. It’s only natural that all fae turn fully seelie one day.”

I curl my fingers into fists. The more she talks, the more I want her to shut up, because if she says another word—

“Maybe it isn’t so much that she’s seeking salvation but to corrupt Brother Dorian.” The taunting feminine voice comes from behind me. I turn to find a blonde dressed in a simple gray dress. The neck is high and the bodice unadorned, but the modest style doesn’t hide the ample curve of her bosom. I’d die to have curves like that myself. She props an elbow on the back of my pew and gives the other girl a wry grin.

Vanessa's mouth falls open. "Corrupt Brother Dorian! That's blasphemy!"

"What's blasphemy is how you condemn your own kind." The blonde sweeps a lock of hair off her brow to casually show off her pointed ears.

"Arguing is a sin so I will say no more." With that, Vanessa faces away from us, receiving an approving nod from her shrewd-looking chaperone.

I glance back at the blonde.

"Maisie, is it?" she asks. "I'm Briony Rose."

"Briony Rose…am I the only full fae that doesn't have a surname?"

"Oh, it's not a real surname. It's what Sisters Agatha, Spruce, and Marsh call me at the convent. I know nothing of my parentage. Whoever they were, they sent me to the sisters for schooling when I was but a babe. And since I'm technically not out in society, I was allowed to come unchaperoned, much to the brotherhood's chagrin." Her lips lift in another mischievous smile, and I know right then that I like Briony Rose.

I hear the telltale pop of the flash bulb at the door and turn to see another girl entering the church. She seems much more comfortable than I was with the camera and holds a few different poses for Mr. Sputnik before stopping to chat with Glint McCreedy. Based on how she gestures to her skirt, I assume they're talking about her ensemble—a mauve skirt and matching jacket with sleeves twice as puffy as mine. After sharing a laugh with the reporter, she heads down the aisle. She's full fae with heavily bejeweled pointed ears and walks with her nose in the air, bustled skirts swishing with every step. Where the other contestants are seated with a single companion, this woman has two, both young girls. She claims a pew on the opposite side of the aisle from me.

The front doors of the church close, and another figure enters from the antechamber. I recognize him as Father Viktor, the priest I delivered word of Dorian's fate to. Behind him follows Brother Billius, and at his side—

My breath catches in my throat.

It's Brother Dorian.

14

In the days since I made the bargain with Nimue, I've tried to envision what Dorian looks like. Not how I truly remember him on that dark and rocky shore but how I would prefer to see him. As a fae-killing beast with cruel eyes, a loping gait, hunched shoulders, and meaty hands made for strangling innocents. A killer who stalks his prey with a menacing snarl. But as I look at him now, I see nothing close to my imaginings.

Instead, I see his strong posture, his warrior's nose, his wide-shouldered build. His hair is darker than I first thought it to be, cropped short on the sides while the top falls in loose black curls. He's dressed not in the robes the other two men wear but a black jacket and slacks with gold embroidery at the cuffs and high-buttoned collar. As he passes my pew on his way to the altar, I get a closer look. I take in dark eyes, high cheekbones, and full lips.

Lips I must kiss within seven days.

My mouth tingles at the thought. Not that it ever stopped tingling since Nimue altered my magic, but it seems to grow sharper, almost painful. As if my lips know my target on sight and are ready to do my bidding. To kill.

Guilt sinks my stomach, but I remind myself this man is dangerous. He murdered a sea fae and bathed in her blood. His assassination was sanctioned by the Alpha Council. By my father.

The reminder eases only a fraction of my tension as he continues past. That's when I get a look at his backside. There I find a rounded curve of blubber beneath his starched trousers. I can't help but admit I like what I see. I'm not the only one, either. Every pair of eyes follows Brother Dorian as he strides with swift, confident steps up the dais to the altar. My nose

twitches, much the same way it does when I see pretty treasures made for stealing.

I shake the thought from my head. Dorian isn't a treasure. He's a mark. A target. A beast destined to die.

"He isn't half bad, is he?" Briony whispers from behind me.

I startle at the sound of her voice but force an agreeable grin.

Father Viktor stands at the center of the dais, flanked by Dorian and Billius. The latter grins in his leering sort of way while Dorian stands with his hands clasped behind his back, expression firm, cold. Maybe haughty is a better word. With how much taller he stands than both Billius and Viktor, there is something domineering about his presence. Perhaps that's just his hidden darkness showing through. I expect his eyes to flit my way—or really any direction other than straight ahead of him—but they don't. He simply stares at nothing and no one. Is he nervous? Or does he hate faekind so much that he can't be bothered to feign interest in a pageant being held in his name? Podaxis climbs onto my lap, and I lift him to my chest so he can see the dais.

"Welcome, children of the Almighty," says Father Viktor. He closes his eyes and presses a fist over his heart, a warm smile curving beneath his bushy mustache. The light from the altar's brazier catches on the gold hoops he wears in his ears. "May Saint Lazaro's Holy Fire forever warm our hearts."

"Blessed be His Holy Fire," Dorian and Billius say in unison.

I glance around at the contestants to see if we're meant to repeat any of that, but Vanessa is the only one who speaks. Her words, however, are, "Praise Almighty."

I wrinkle my nose, feeling thoroughly out of place.

"It's weird for me too," Briony whispers behind me, "and I live in a convent."

I give her a grateful smile and return my attention to the dais.

Brother Viktor opens his eyes and extends his hands. "Contestants, welcome to our humble pageant. I am Father Viktor, priest of the Lumenas branch of the Church of Saint Lazaro. To my right is Brother Billius, and to my left is someone I know you are all very excited to meet, Brother Dorian of the Order of Strength."

I haven't a clue what the Order of Strength means, only that Nimue made it sound like a bad thing. I'm curious why neither Viktor nor Billius

were announced as belonging to any Order, but the priest doesn't bother explaining. He pauses and gestures toward Dorian. I expect him to acknowledge us now that he's been introduced, but he doesn't.

"The brotherhood is very grateful for all of you to join us," Father Viktor says, "and I'm sure you are eager to hear how our contest will work. Firstly, let's take a moment to acknowledge our seven contestants and give each of you a chance to greet Brother Dorian." He pauses as Brother Billius hands him his notebook. Meanwhile, Glint McCreedy and Sam Sputnik race down the aisle. The photographer sets his camera on a tripod between the two front pews while the reporter crouches at the base of the dais. Viktor scans Billius' notebook and gestures to the frontmost pew opposite me. "Josie Richmond."

A girl with mousy brown hair slowly rises from her pew. Her lips are pressed tight to suppress a blushing grin as she makes her way up the dais to stand before Dorian. For the first time since arriving on the dais, he moves. Loosely taking her gloved fingers in his, he bends down and plants a chaste kiss on the back of her hand. "Pleased to meet you, Josie Richmond," he says, voice so soft I hardly hear it. He pauses with her hand still clasped in his, and the camera bulb flares. Once the light dims, he releases her and gestures for her to return to her seat.

Next, Father Viktor calls up the girl sitting behind Josie. "Franny Delafonte."

She approaches the dais with far less enthusiasm than her predecessor. She doesn't even bother with a smile as Dorian kisses her hand, and when they pause for the camera, she tenses.

Then it's the next girl's turn. "Agnes Breene," Viktor announces.

A kiss on the hand. A flash of the bulb.

Then the next.

"Greta Garter."

Greta is the pretty woman with the overly puffed sleeves. Her skirts swish as she strolls up to the dais. When she stops before Dorian, she lowers into an elegant curtsy. "I'm so honored to be here," she says in a sing-song voice, then offers her gloved hand with a flourish. I'm stunned when I see a corner of Dorian's lips flick up with amusement. Before now, his face remained as somber as a man at a funeral. The expression is quickly steeled as he kisses her hand. When he angles himself slightly toward the camera, Greta steps in scandalously close. She puckers her lips,

tilting her head slightly down. Then she releases Dorian's hand and strikes a couple poses next to him, hands on her hips, then one patting her hair. Dorian steps back and allows her to claim the camera's attention on her own. He rolls his eyes, and that hint of a smile returns to his lips. For some reason, the sight of it sends my stomach fluttering.

"Very good," Viktor says when it's clear she won't leave the dais without intervention. Placing a hand on her shoulder, he guides her down the steps. With a nervous chuckle, he turns his attention to the front pew of my row. "Vanessa Courter."

The girl in front of me rises with her head held high and stops several feet before Dorian, greeting him with a nod. With stiff, formal moves, she offers Dorian her hand, a model of feminine propriety. This time I'm the one doing the eye-rolling. I don't bother to watch as she poses next to him for the camera, nor do I acknowledge her smug expression when she sits back down in front of me.

"Princess Maisie of the Sea Court," Viktor says.

That gets my attention. My heart leaps into my throat as all eyes round on me. Vanessa gasps as she whirls in her seat. I'm certain it has everything to do with the *princess* part of my name. Shells. More unwanted attention.

"Go," Podaxis mutters.

On trembling legs, I rise and head up the aisle. Glint McCreedy shadows my every step, scribbling in his notebook at a rapid pace. My eyes lock on Dorian's as I climb the dais. I study his face, seeking any sign that he recognizes me, that he knows I'm the one who rescued him. But his expression betrays nothing. There's only grim politeness in his bearing as he takes my gloved hand. Even with fabric between us, I stiffen at the feel of his touch. He bends forward. I find myself frozen as I watch his lips descend upon the back of my hand, a black curl falling over his forehead. My nose twitches. Once. Twice. It's that feeling again, the strange tickle I get when I want to steal something. What the shells? He straightens, and that black curl remains over his forehead as our eyes meet.

"Pleased to meet you, Princess Maisie," he says. Where before I could hardly hear his voice when he greeted the other girls, I now hear it clearly. It's deep, rumbling. Another twitch of my nose—

With a heave, I sneeze. Too late, I snatch away my hand to cover my nose and mouth. He takes a startled step back. Right then, the light of the flash bulb flares. "I'm sorry," I whisper.

He blinks a few times. Then a corner of his mouth flicks up. “It’s all right,” he says, a hint of amusement in his tone.

Mortified, I rush down the dais and return to my pew. I can’t bring myself to watch as Briony Rose is called up next. “I sneezed on him,” I mutter to Podaxis. “I sneezed on him and everyone saw.” Even I know that’s a social misdeed.

Podaxis taps my thigh. “It’s what he gets for hurling seawater in your face.”

His words aren’t even a little consoling. I battle the urge to slump in my pew and disappear into the Twelfth Court.

Briony Rose returns to her seat, and Father Viktor speaks again. “Now that you’ve all been formally introduced, let us proceed with rules. If you would like to win the heart of Brother Dorian, you must be the last remaining contestant at the end of the final Blessing Ceremony. There are seven of you, and our pageant will last seven days. Our first Blessing Ceremony will be tomorrow, during which the first elimination will be made. One contestant will be sent home each night from then on, with the final elimination resulting in our winner. Until you are eliminated, you must remain on church grounds and not leave the premises. Outside of your dates with Brother Dorian, the Blessing Ceremonies, or any other official pageant events, you will be confined to the women’s wing inside the church. This is to protect the sanctity of the space our brothers are used to living in. Do not worry, though. All meals will be brought to you, and we have done our best to make your bedrooms comfortable.”

“Trapped in a church,” Briony mutters. “Sounds like I left the convent for nothing.”

“Blessing Ceremonies will be open to the public,” Viktor continues, “and group events will be documented by our guest reporter, Glint McCreedy. Tonight, all contestants will dine together as a chance to get to know one another. Tomorrow, each of you will be allotted one hour to spend with Brother Dorian. It will be a chaperoned visit and will take place inside the church in either the library, the garden, or the parlor, per Brother Dorian’s preference. More of these hour-long visits will occur throughout the week and will allow Dorian to get to know the contestants on a personal level and help him narrow down his choice of bride. Each day you can expect either a group event or the aforementioned individual dates. At the conclusion of this pageant, the wedding will commence.”

“You mean, right away?” Vanessa asks.

Father Viktor opens his mouth to answer, but Greta Garter speaks first. “That’s how these things work, darling. Have you never participated in one before?”

Vanessa ignores Greta and whispers to her chaperone, “I don’t even have a wedding dress picked out.”

“To officially answer your question, Miss Courter,” Father Viktor says, “the wedding will occur by midnight after the final Blessing Ceremony. Now, with all those details out of the way, I do wish you the best of luck and a wonderful time. This is our church’s first bridal contest, and we hope it won’t be the last.”

Brother Billius’ smile grows wider at this last part.

Footsteps sound from behind me and I turn to see several boys like the one who took my bag—all young teens, if I were to make a guess about human aging. They file down the aisle, and one boy stops at each occupied pew.

“Be blessed by His Holy Fire,” Viktor says and makes the fist-to-heart gesture again. “If you will, please follow your assigned initiate to your sleeping quarters.” With that, he, Billius, and Dorian leave the dais and exit out a side door.

THE INITIATES LEAD US OUT OF THE CHURCHY PART OF THE CHURCH, WHICH I have now learned—thanks to the boy assigned to me—is called a nave. From there, we enter the front antechamber and take another door that leads to a dimly lit hall. After a few turns, we pass a courtyard garden, then take a flight of stairs. Finally, we come to a wing of the church lined with closed doors.

My guide stops outside one of them. “This is your room, Miss—I mean, Your Highness.”

“No need to call me that,” I say with a flippant wave of my hand. “Maisie is fine.”

The boy grimaces. “Oh, I don’t think that’s proper.”

“And I’m not a very proper princess. I’m not too fond of this *Your Highness* business.”

The boy shifts from foot to foot and says, “If you insist I call you Maisie, I will call you *Miss* Maisie.”

“I’ll accept that,” I say with a resigned sigh. “And you are?”

“Initiate Jeremy.”

“How old are you, Jeremy?”

“Thirteen. Dinner is at five this evening and I will be back to escort you. Do not leave the women’s wing without me. Chaperones won’t be required tonight as it will be a group occasion. Speaking of chaperones…” The boy clears his throat. “This wing of the church has been specially reserved for women for the duration of the pageant. So your…friend will find his room downstairs.”

My eyes widen and I press Podaxis closer to my chest. “What? Why?”

“Only female chaperones are allowed to reside in this wing. Please, Your Highness, I don’t want to tell you what to do, as you’re a royal, but my superiors were quite insistent that I ensure your male companion would not room with you. It would cause quite a scandal.” His cheeks turn beet red at that.

I suppress a groan. No one batted an eye when I roomed with Podaxis at the Lunar palace a year ago. Of course, that was a fae environment and an unseelie one at that.

“He’ll have his very own room in the initiates’ wing,” Jeremy says. “It’s just one floor down.”

Podaxis taps my shoulder in a soothing gesture. “It’s all right,” he says. Despite his consoling tone, my heart sinks. Fungus sprites do not like being alone, and Podaxis has rarely ever had to be. “I’ll be fine.”

“Very well,” I say.

Jeremy looks from me to Podaxis. “Do I…carry you, Mister Crab?”

My friend snaps a pincer his way. “The name is Podaxis, boy, and no, I can walk on my own.” He scurries out of my grip and I set him down. No sooner than he touches the ground does he scuttle down the hall.

The boy chases after him. “I am to escort you, Mister…Podaxis. Wait! Let me show you where our quarters are.”

My lips curl into a sad smile as I watch Podaxis round the corner. Once he disappears, I turn my attention to the other side of the wing, finding all the other girls have entered their rooms, some with the doors open to let out strains of excited conversation, others with their doors closed.

I enter my room, finding a sparsely furnished space. It may be modest, but it feels like a palace after my tiny accommodations at the theater. It's about four times the size. While the bed is only slightly larger than I'm used to, it's covered in clean linen sheets and a wool blanket, with a nice fat pillow propped in front of the headboard. Above that hangs a framed painting depicting the same scene behind the altar in the nave. The pale walls are otherwise unadorned, aside from a curtained window. The only other furnishings in the room are a bedside table, dressing table, and wardrobe. My bag rests on the floor in front of the latter, but I head straight for the window.

Sliding the curtains aside, I'm greeted by sunlight and a view of the garden one floor below. The garden is open to the sky and filled with an array of greenery surrounding a spiral walking path that leads to a circular courtyard in the middle. I spot a few of the brothers dressed in robes trimming hedges and pruning shrubs, but other than that, it's empty. For several moments I do nothing but stare at the view, watching the brothers work, admiring the tallest branches of a slim white birch, its leaves caught by the breeze overhead. I allow my mind to empty, forget the dark deed I must do—

"Maisie."

I leap back with a shout as a sharp *tap* raps on my window. Then I spot one red claw waving over the sill outside. "What the shells…Podaxis?" I hurry back to the window and flip the latch. I find my friend clinging to the windowsill. He ducks as the window swivels outward, and I lean forward to drag him inside before I catch the attention of the gardeners. With the window closed and locked behind us, I turn to my friend with a surprised grin. Podaxis isn't known for being spontaneous or daring. "What are you doing?"

He looks up at me from the floor. "My room is just downstairs. Didn't you hear the boy?"

"Yes, but I didn't think you'd climb up a wall to find me."

"It's brick," he says as if that explains everything. "Easy to climb."

"Well, I'm glad you found your way here without getting caught."

"Speaking of getting caught…" He clacks his pincers together several times before his eyes widen with a panicked look I know so well. His voice raises an octave. "How the shells are you going to pull this off, Maisie?"

I shrug. "How *won't* I?"

“You heard how the pageant is structured. You’ll only see Dorian alone for an hour at a time. There are only seven days of the pageant and since tonight is just a public dinner, that gives only six hours *maximum* for you to be alone with him. And that’s only if the private dates occur daily and you make it to the end.”

“Who said anything about making it to the end?”

He runs a claw over his face. “Maisie, I don’t know if you’ve overlooked how closely this church seems to follow social strictures, but I find it highly unlikely a man of the church is going to kiss someone he’s only known for a handful of hours. I’m willing to bet he won’t kiss until marriage. Maisie…you’re going to have to win the pageant.”

“You’re talking nonsense. Were you under the impression I was simply going to wait for *him* to kiss *me*?”

“Well…yes. Is that not proper for a young lady?”

I throw my head back with a laugh. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard. Can you imagine?”

“So, you aren’t going to try and win?”

“Nope.” I turn toward my carpet bag and begin to unpack it. “At the first chance I can get Dorian alone, I’m ending this. I’ll stroll right up to him, press my lips against his, and be over with it. By tomorrow night, I’ll be free.”

15

At five o'clock, Jeremy arrives to escort me to dinner. Podaxis left out the window a few minutes earlier with a promise to investigate the layout of the church in my absence. The more we know of our surroundings, the more successful my mission will be. Since Dorian will be choosing the locations for his one-on-one rendezvous, I'll need to plan for my kiss to be delivered in any of them. Despite Nimue's insistence that it would be impossible to link me to his death, I still want to do everything in my power to avoid suspicion.

"The dining room is right this way, Miss Maisie," Jeremy says as he stops outside an open doorway.

I shake my morbid thoughts from my mind and enter the room. It's plain and windowless with cream papered walls crammed with old-fashioned paintings in thick wood frames. The table is a long rectangle dressed in a floral-patterned cloth laid with an assortment of trays. Glancing down the length of the table, I find all six other contestants have arrived and are the only other people in the room. A few chat amongst themselves while others regard each other in icy silence. The iciest of all are Vanessa and Greta, seated on opposite sides flanking the head of the table, although most of the chill comes from Vanessa. She watches the other girl with a clenched jaw. Greta, on the other hand, bats her lashes with a placid smile as if she hasn't any clue about Vanessa's ire.

Briony leaves the table and strolls over to me. "You're too late to claim the best seats," she says with a smirk.

I frown. "What best seats?"

She nods toward Vanessa and Greta. “We assume Dorian will be seated at the head of the table.”

I suppose that stands to reason. The one time I ate at the royal table back home, Father sat there too. The head of the table must be a place of great importance, but I can’t see how the food tastes any better from there.

“We should probably claim our seats too.” Briony returns to the table, and I follow, taking a seat opposite from her at the middle of the table. The other three contestants chat at the far end.

“This isn’t the dinner party I expected,” Vanessa says from her coveted seat. “We should have met in a parlor and then been led in by our escorts. There are ample empty seats, which means there are plenty more guests. I wore my best gown for this, you know.” Her eyes wander the table and land on me. They flash to Briony and her lips curl into a smirk. “Not all of us had the decency to change, it seems.”

“Was I supposed to change?” I glance down at my outfit, then back at the other girls. Briony and I are the only ones wearing the same thing as earlier. Everyone else is dressed in a gown, with the two most elegant ones being worn by Vanessa and Greta. Vanessa’s is a confection of fuchsia silk and lace while Greta’s is green satin with black beaded sleeves. The three other girls wear dresses too, although theirs are plainer in comparison. Still, I suddenly feel highly underdressed. It hadn’t occurred to me I should change for dinner, especially since I brought so few outfits. I was saving my best garments for tomorrow when I meet with Dorian alone. Which, now that I think about it, is quite absurd, considering I’ll be murdering the man. Nausea turns my stomach, but I refuse to give way to darker thoughts.

Freedom. Just focus on the freedom that awaits.

And the fact that I’ll die if I don’t do this.

Vanessa scoffs, stealing my attention back to her. “Are you truly a princess? You certainly don’t act like one.”

I open my mouth, but Briony speaks first. “Not all cows need to *moo* to convince others of what they are.” She looks Vanessa up and down, then plasters a coy smile over her lips. “Clearly.”

“Well, I think everyone looks marvelous tonight,” Greta Garter says with a flourish of her hand, oblivious to the tension in the room. She shines a grin down the table at each of us. When her gaze lands on the girl opposite her, she leans across the table to tap Vanessa on the tip of her nose. “Don’t frown, darling, you’ll get wrinkles.”

“The food looks…tolerable,” one of the girls says in a flat voice from the other side of the table. Franny, I think is her name, the girl who looked highly unenthused when she was introduced to Dorian. She has broad shoulders and auburn hair done in two braids at the side of her face that loop down around her ears to the back of her head. She eyes the spread of roasted vegetables, fish, and something that looks like porridge. “Are we supposed to wait for them? I’m starving.”

I shrug and inspect the table further. I’ve never been a picky eater, but I must admit, the food looks rather plain. The fish looks good, but—*wait*! “Please tell me those are Lumies!” I reach across the table toward what looks like my most favorite confection…only to find it’s just a bread roll. “Oh, that’s disappointing.”

“What’s disappointing? And what’s a Lumies?” The voice is deep and—while not entirely familiar—I know who it belongs to before I see him.

My thoughts go still as Dorian strolls through the doorway, his eyes locked on me bent over the dinner table, my hand in the bowl of bread rolls. Silence falls over the room, and the girls stand in respectful greeting. I, on the other hand, have to find a graceful way to straighten. Father Viktor and Billius follow just behind as well as a couple brothers I’m unfamiliar with. All are dressed in the black clothing of the brotherhood. Apparently, the men didn’t deem it necessary to dress up. Lucky bastards. Bringing up the rear is the reporter, Glint McCreedy. I’m grateful the photographer doesn’t seem to be present, at least. I’ve had more than enough embarrassing photographs taken for the day.

“You’ve never had Lumies, Brother Dorian?” Father Viktor chuckles as he comes up beside him and claps him on the shoulder. Relief melts over me as the priest steals Dorian’s attention away from me. “This must be rectified. But not tonight. Tonight, we dine on humble offerings.” The priest glances around the room, then pulls his head back. “I must say, ladies, that you look wonderful, but I should have clarified that this will be an informal meal, not a dinner party.”

Brother Billius scans the contestants with a much more appreciative eye. “Young ladies do like to dazzle,” he says with a toothy grin.

“At least sit down,” Viktor says and—much to Vanessa’s horror and Greta’s pouty disappointment—heads straight for the head of the table.

Vanessa masks her glare behind a grin as Viktor lowers into the seat. “Pardon me for saying, Father Viktor, but shouldn’t Brother Dorian sit

here? He is the man of honor tonight, is he not?"

Viktor blushes as his eyes flash from Vanessa to Dorian. "Too true, my dear. How silly of me. I'm so used to sitting here—"

"No," Dorian says before the priest can rise. His expression is a cold mask, much like it was when he stood upon the dais, his tone formal. "As priest, you are the voice of the Almighty and head of this church. You'll remain at the head of this table where you belong. I will sit amongst my potential future brides." With that, he walks over to the table…and claims a seat right next to me. Franny sits to his left while another brother sits at my right between me and Greta. Billius plants himself between Vanessa and Briony, while Glint McCreedy sits across from Dorian, with Agnes and Josie to his right.

It takes me far too long to realize I'm the last one standing. Heat rises to my cheeks as I lower onto my chair and gather my composure. Why am I so flustered?

"While this may be an informal dinner," Viktor says, "we will say grace. Let us—"

"Oh, may I have the honor to say it?" Vanessa asks with far too much enthusiasm.

Viktor frowns but his expression quickly turns to amusement. "Certainly, Miss Courter. I could never dream of standing in the way of one's love for the Almighty. Let us take one another's hands." Viktor extends his hands to each side, and Vanessa clasps his with a demure smile and closes her eyes.

"Oh," says Greta with surprise and takes the priest's hand as well. That's all that prepares me for the two palms that extend my way, one from the brother to my right, the other from Dorian at my left. I glance around the table and see that we've created a chain of clasped hands. Well, everyone aside from me, apparently.

I look from one open hand to the other and finally place my gloved palms over theirs. The hand to my right is as limp as a dead fish while the left is merely warm. Firm. Vanessa starts a prayer with, "Dearest Almighty," but I can hardly focus on a word of it. My attention has narrowed to every point of contact Dorian's gloves make against mine. The touch of the man I saved. The one I'll soon kill. It's so all-consuming that it makes my lungs feel tight. I glance at our clasped hands but force my eyes away, force my attention onto anything but the man at my side.

With a deep breath, I look across the table and find everyone else has their eyes closed. Well, then there's Greta, who keeps sneaking a peek with one eye now and then. She seems to be the only other person at this table who's as out of place as I feel. Even Briony holds the hands of her companions with ease, keeping her eyelids pressed shut as Vanessa drones on and on about the bounty of the table.

I continue my assessment of my dinner companions, but as my gaze falls on the other end of the table, I catch sight of Dorian from my periphery. I'm torn between looking away or taking my chance to study him while his eyes are closed. The latter urge wins, and I slowly angle my face toward his, just enough to see those dark lashes up close, the curl of his hair, the fullness of his mouth—

His eyelids flutter open and his face swivels slightly toward me.

My heart hammers against my ribs as his eyes meet mine. I close them at once and avert my face, trying to ignore how warm my palm has become in his. For once, I'm thankful I'm wearing gloves, for surely my hands are sweating now. My pulse continues to pound as Vanessa drags out the end of her prayer. I don't dare open my eyes, don't dare let myself wonder if he's still looking at me…

"Blessed be His Holy Fire," Father Viktor says.

"Blessed be His Holy Fire," comes the echo from the brothers.

When Dorian releases my hand, I feel I can breathe again, but I'm strangely frozen in place. The absence of touch feels heavy in one empty palm and inconsequential in the other.

It's guilt, I tell myself. *That's what that heavy feeling is*.

It's enough to sink my heart and make me question everything I'm doing. Did I truly agree to *kill* a man?

Dorian glances over at me as if my thoughts had been uttered out loud. My throat constricts as he leans a little closer. "Are you well, Miss…I mean…Your Highness?" The question is polite, but it holds no warmth.

"I am well," I rush to say, but he doesn't look away. His expression is hard, wary, his eyes not full of concern but something else entirely…

Is it disdain? Disgust? Suspicion?

A fae-killer seeking a fae bride.

I take a deep breath and remind myself why I'm really here. Why *he's* really here. He doesn't care about me or the fae or this pageant. He only wants to claim a fae bride to guarantee citizenship that the Alpha Council

doesn’t want to grant. Because he killed a fae. Because his father was an evil man who did vile things to my people. Because he’s already following in his father’s footsteps, joining a church that once sparked a rebellion that got thousands killed.

Even if Dorian were the kindest creature on earth, the truth remains. This is a matter of life or death. If he doesn’t die, I will. Nimue’s curse will claim me in seven days.

When it comes to his life or mine, the choice is easy.

I choose mine.

16

As dinner commences, Glint McCreedy begins asking questions of Dorian and my fellow contestants, taking notes of the answers in his book. Vanessa and Greta seem to be competing for his attention with their long-winded answers, Vanessa's about her passion for her church while Greta's comprise her personal likes and dislikes, which I've learned include musical theater amongst her likes and cockroaches amongst her dislikes.

I tune out most of the conversations but not on purpose. Despite my every attempt to ignore Dorian's nearness, I find myself too aware of every move he makes. Our seats are spaced far enough apart that there's no risk of touching after the hand-holding incident, and yet my muscles are coiled as if I expect him to strike at any moment.

In contrast, the man on my right—who I've learned is named Brother Christopher—could be poisoning my food for all the attention I've paid him during the meal. And he, unlike Dorian, has said more than three words to me since the evening began. In fact, he's said far too much for my liking, constantly asking me how I enjoy the food, if I find my accommodations favorable, what my favorite color is. Based on similar attentions shown from the brothers to the other contestants, I'm starting to wonder if this meal is some ploy to display Saint Lazaro's other eligible bachelors. Brother Billius does seem to have taken a liking to Vanessa. He's offered her extra helpings of every dish half a dozen times by now and even tried to cut her fish into bite-sized pieces for her. Meanwhile, she has done everything to ignore him.

“Have you eaten enough?” Brother Christopher asks, seeming to take a page from Billius’ book of dinnertime conversation. “Might I offer you another bread roll?”

I stare down at my plate. I’ve hardly managed more than a few bites of fish. “No, thank you,” I say as politely as I can.

“But you seemed so fond of them,” he says. “I mean, when I first entered the dining room. You seemed most eager for them.”

My cheeks heat as I recall my embarrassment earlier tonight. “I thought they were Lumies,” I mumble, then swallow further conversation with a sip of water.

To my horror, Dorian turns toward me. “I’ve yet to hear what Lumies are.”

I nearly choke on my water as his eyes bore into me. It takes me several heartbeats to find my words. “They’re…a dessert.”

He waits for me to elaborate, but I can’t seem to conjure a better explanation. Why the shells do I freeze whenever he looks at me? Is it just my guilt showing? If I were trying to win an award for *most conspicuous assassin,* I’d be holding the trophy by now.

Thankfully, I’m rescued by Glint McCreedy’s next question. “Father Viktor, might I make a rather delicate inquiry?”

Viktor gives him a gracious nod. “I am a man of truth and will answer any questions you might have.”

The reporter leans forward, pen poised on paper. “As men of a religious brotherhood, I expected vows of celibacy. Do the brothers of Saint Lazaro forgo such vows?”

A pink flush creeps up Father Viktor’s neck, but he remains otherwise composed. “We do keep such vows, Mr. McCreedy. However, our church thrives off proliferation and we want to do all that’s in our power to encourage that. Therefore, our church has what we call Orders. When a brother takes an Order, he is no longer bound to a life spent solely in his church. He becomes the face of Saint Lazaro’s three main tenets—truth, service, and strength—in the public eye. He can marry, live outside the church, and take an occupation that allows him to represent his Order.”

“Do your different styles of clothing have anything to do with these Orders?” Glint asks.

“They do,” Viktor says. He gestures to Dorian, then Christopher. “These men have taken Orders, with Brother Dorian belonging to the Order of

Strength and Brother Christopher to the Order of Service. Their style of jacket denotes that they've taken Orders, while the rest of us wear robes. Brother Christopher has his own apartment downtown and works to feed the poor." He then nods at Billius. "Once Brother Billius finds a bride, he intends to take an Order as well. For now, he's training to enter the Order of Truth by taking confession here at the church. As you see, some brothers take Orders before marriage, while others wait until they have reason to take an Order."

"Ah," Glint says, scribbling in his notebook. "Thank you ever so much for explaining that. And what, might I ask, is Brother Dorian's occupation? What does a brother from the Order of Strength do?" His eyes flash from Dorian to Viktor, though neither answers right away.

Viktor's expression reveals slight discomfort with the question, but his tone remains cordial when he finally speaks. "The Order of Strength is a less common Order these days. It was once held by the church's private military force. But after the war and then the rebellions…well, we no longer train brothers to fight, nor are we allowed weapons. It's all for the best." He rushes to say the last part.

Glint squints at the priest. "Then what exactly does Brother Dorian do? How does he demonstrate his Order in the public eye?"

Viktor smiles, but it looks more like a grimace. "It has yet to be decided how Brother Dorian will support the Order of Strength. He still lives at the church, you see."

Glint opens his mouth to ask another question, but Dorian speaks first, tone curt. "There are other ways to demonstrate strength without using weapons. There's strength of mind. Strength of heart. Strength of character. Even strength of body can be accomplished without violence. I admire strength as a quality, therefore I chose it as my Order."

I resist the urge to narrow my eyes at the side of his head. It's a pretty speech, but I can't help thinking about his father. Astern Ariko belonged to the Order of Strength. He too admired such a quality. He admired it so much, he started an illegal fae fighting ring. Is that the real reason Dorian chose the Order? To be like his father? That's certainly what Nimue suggested.

Speaking of, I'm surprised no one brings up Dorian's heritage. No one asks about it. It occurs to me that I might be the only contestant who knows the truth about his past, that he's here under religious sanctuary. Everyone

else seems to assume—the reporter included—that Dorian has been with the brotherhood a long while. Then again, when I first saw Dorian's photograph outside the church, I assumed the same thing.

"Thank you for explaining, Brother Dorian," Glint says. "Now, is it true you were recently in a shipwreck?"

My breath hitches at that. Perhaps the reporter isn't so uninformed after all. Dorian goes rigid in his seat. I watch as he carefully sets down his fork and dabs his lips with a cloth napkin. "Why do you ask?" he says.

The reporter manages not to blanch under the intensity of Dorian's dark stare. "Sources say they spotted a man being carried to the church from the shore, and many have speculated that man was you."

Dorian's jaw shifts back and forth. He glances briefly to Father Viktor, who nods. "I was shipwrecked, but I survived."

I'm surprised he isn't taking the opportunity to claim his ship was attacked. If he confessed to being targeted by the fae, it could cause an uproar. The humans could demand an inquest. If it were ever revealed that the Alpha Council sanctioned an assassination on a human, there could be another rebellion. That is, unless the council were to successfully paint Dorian as the villain during the investigation. Which they could.

Perhaps Dorian's silence on the matter is more in his favor. After all, it would make sense that if he says nothing to condemn the fae, the fae wouldn't move against him. That's an incorrect assumption, of course, as proven by my presence here tonight.

"Why were you on a ship?" Vanessa asks. "Was it a mission trip?"

"I was coming from Bretton," is all Dorian says.

"How did you survive the shipwreck?" Glint asks.

"I swam to shore."

"How? As a human, you shouldn't have been able to penetrate the barrier alone."

Dorian hesitates before answering. "I wasn't alone."

I freeze. My heart thuds heavy in my chest.

The reporter leans in, eyes alight with fascination. "Someone rescued you?"

Dorian's fingers curl and uncurl next to his dinner plate. "Yes," he finally says.

Glint sits so far on the edge of his seat, it's a miracle he hasn't toppled onto the table. "Who?"

I hold my breath, expecting Dorian to look at me, to give some sign that he knows who I am…

He shakes his head. “I don’t remember.”

For some outrageous reason, my heart sinks at his answer, but the feeling is quickly washed away by indignation. How dare he not remember me?

“You don’t remember? But…has no one told you?” Glint McCreedy’s eyes flash to me. “Your rescuer sits at this very table.”

The blood leaves my face and I take every indignant thought back. *Please don’t mention me. Please don’t mention me.*

Dorian shutters his eyes. “Excuse me?”

“It’s Princess Maisie,” the reporter says, and I wish I could shrivel on the spot as every pair of eyes turns toward me. Vanessa glares as if I’d outright begged for such attention by dancing nude on the table. Greta stares with such a wide smile, one would think she was watching an entertaining show.

Glint speaks again, addressing me. “I have it on good authority, Your Highness, that you mentioned having saved Brother Dorian when you signed up for the pageant. You said it was one of the reasons you wanted to participate. I have here a quote from you that states, ‘I’m madly in love with him. I’ll do anything to win his heart.’”

I sink low in my seat, cursing Zara yet again for her impression of me. Did she have to take it that far?

Dorian slowly swivels to face me, expression as stern as always. “You rescued me? Why is this the first time I’m hearing about it?”

My mouth falls open, but no words come, my tongue tangled like kelp on the seashore.

“I too would like a statement on the matter,” Glint says.

I look from Dorian to the reporter, trying to think of something—anything—to change the subject. Then I feel a light tug on my skirt. I glance down to find a red claw gripping my hem. Farther beneath the table, I can just make out Podaxis’ mushroomed carapace. Relief floods through me at the sight of him, if only for the momentary distraction. He tugs my skirt again, and I see him mouthing something that I can’t hear.

I return my attention to the intense gazes of the onlookers, then to my dinner plate. With one swift move, I bring my hand to the table and brush my fork off the side, allowing it to drop to the ground.

“Let me get that,” Brother Christopher says, but I dive down before he can so much as flinch.

My hands come around the handle of the fork just as Podaxis whispers, “Say you will neither confirm nor deny their allegations.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just say it! It’s in the broadsheets all the time. It means you’re not saying you did do it, but not denying it either. It’s that *lying without lying* thing you do so well.”

“All right,” I say and sit back upright. Then, all at once, I blurt out, “I’ll neither confirm nor deny these allegations.”

Silence echoes back at me, and it’s all made worse by how Dorian continues to stare. I can’t bring myself to meet his eyes. What would I even find in them? Gratitude? Surprise? Fear that I know his secret? Suspicion over the reason I’ve come here?

Sweat begins to bead at the back of my neck.

“Who is Saint Lazaro?” Briony’s voice shatters the silence, and I couldn’t be more grateful to anyone at that moment.

“Oh, yes!” Father Viktor says, as if he’s as eager as I am to speak of something else. “I hadn’t realized not all of you know of our beloved saint and his martyrdom.”

“How exactly was he martyred?” Greta asks, her tone bubbling with excitement. “I recently saw a play that acted out the most gruesome and realistic disembowelment before he was slowly burned to a crisp.”

Viktor blinks at her as if he can’t fathom her enthusiasm. Then he clears his throat. “Saint Lazaro was sentenced to death by fire after the people of his time condemned what they thought were mad ravings. In his final days, he was quite out of sorts and people thought him possessed by the devil. He was adamant that the fae were coming for us all. This was before the first war, mind you, and it was thought speaking ill of the fae would draw their wrath. So he was killed. Then, after the first war began, Saint Lazaro’s words were no longer considered ravings but prophecy.”

“So, that’s what this church is based off of?” Franny asks, speaking for the first time all night. She continues to look like she thoroughly wishes to be anywhere else. “The ravings of a madman?”

The priest chuckles. “Oh, no, of course not. Lazaro was so much more than a lunatic before his demise. Not only was he a generous philanthropist, he also was a scientist, a seeker of truth. He funded the first research into

faekind and began hypothesizing scientific explanations behind the fae's mysterious powers."

"You mean, he experimented on them," Briony says sweetly. "And then before he died, he claimed all his science was wrong, that fae were the progeny of demons. Don't forget that part too."

"He did experiments, yes," he says, undeterred, "and he may have contradicted his work before his death, but his early findings were the basis for further research when modern science advanced."

"Do you think it's true that Saint Lazaro was cursed by one of the fae he tried to experiment on?" Briony asks, trying to hide her smile behind a serious expression. "And that's why he went raving mad?"

Father Viktor waves a dismissive hand. "What matters most, my dear, is that the Church of Saint Lazaro as it stands today follows not Saint Lazaro's past but his legacy—the three main tenets he stood for. Strength, truth, and service."

"Which of those tenets were you standing for when you rebelled against the fae?" Franny asks, eyes boring into the priest. "Why are so many dark deeds attributed to your church?"

Vanessa gasps. "That is quite a disrespectful question, Miss Delafonte. How dare you—"

"No, my dear, it's all right." He waves a consoling hand at Vanessa, then addresses Franny. "I'm happy to have an honest conversation about our faith. Yes, men from our brotherhood have done terrible things. But evil is not the automatic property of one person, one group, or one organization. Evil is the property of *people*. It can belong to anyone. It has been here, I know, and I deeply regret it ever was. As priest of this church, I seek to atone for the mistakes of those who came before me. I seek to usher Saint Lazaro into the modern world. That's why we've begun hosting bridal pageants. We want to draw in new faces to our congregation. We yearn for the chance to show them we are more than our past."

I snort a laugh. Too late, I try to disguise it as a cough.

"Did you have a comment, my dear?" Viktor asks.

Once again, I find all eyes on me. I know I should keep quiet, but my mouth has other ideas. "Your religion claims fae are the progeny of demons. A bridal pageant and modern theatrics won't usher Saint Lazaro into current times if you're still following such outdated notions."

The priest is quiet for a moment. “I will never cease trying to atone for the mistakes of my church’s past, but I can’t apologize for our faith. All I can do is demonstrate our true heart. And at that heart is peace and unity. That’s why many from our brotherhood seek marriages with fae brides.”

“Oh, I thought it was for fae salvation,” Briony says, expression full of contrived innocence.

Vanessa perks up at that. “Fae salvation is the highest we can strive for.”

Billius turns to her with a wide grin. “I couldn’t agree more.”

I clench my jaw, willing myself to keep quiet. But I can’t. “Fae salvation is kelpie shit.”

Vanessa pales, flinging her hands to her lips. “How can you say that?”

Podaxis taps my leg, a silent reminder that I’m overstepping my bounds.

Dorian swivels toward me, expression hard. “You don’t think the fae are in need of salvation?”

I try to ignore him, but—bounds be damned—it’s impossible not to reply. “I don’t think our souls are any human’s business. Especially when the humans were the ones who rebelled. Before that, they were the ones who attacked our isle and sought to wipe out all life. The fae saved everyone at the end of the war. The fae—”

“The fae are guilty of just as many dark deeds as the humans are,” he says. “Vicious curses, impossible bargains, physical attacks, compulsion… your kind have harmed humans and still do to this day.”

I stammer before I find my words. “All those things are illegal—”

“Do you think it stops them? What about what happened after the last war? The fae punished the isle’s humans—people who played no part in the recent attacks—by robbing them of their lands. They claimed rule over the isle. People lost their homes, their occupations. Is it any wonder we rebelled? My people sought only fairness—”

“That may be how we felt then,” Father Viktor says, half rising from his seat. A smile tugs his lips, but it does nothing to hide the sudden fear in his eyes or the quaver in his voice. “The Church of Saint Lazaro supports peace, not rebellion, I assure you. We were wrong in rebelling against our monarchs. It was only the radicals amongst us who organized the uprising in the first place.” His gaze rests on me, and I realize *I’m* the source of his fear. Or my father is, at least, for if I were to repeat Dorian’s words back to any of the fae royals, the entire church would be held under severe scrutiny.

I can only imagine how the priest's fear would grow tenfold if my maternal parentage were publicly known…

Viktor clears his throat and gives Dorian a pointed look.

He clenches his jaw. "Father Viktor is right. We don't think that way anymore. Only the radicals ever did." Dorian's words come out forced and stiff, but that's how I want to hear them. Because it condemns him. Shows his true colors.

Makes him that much easier to kill.

17

The rest of the dinner concludes with far less tension, thanks to the more benign questions Glint McCreedy asks thereafter. Even so, when Initiate Jeremy arrives to escort me back to my room, I'm more than eager to follow. After my tense conversation with Dorian, I can't stand to be anywhere near him a second longer. The fact that he didn't take a bite of food after tells me he likely feels the same about me. At least now I know Nimue was right about him. Dorian Ariko is just like his father.

Once we reach my room and close the door, I slump against it and release a groan. Exhaustion and irritation battle for supremacy. When I hear a tapping on my window, I drag my feet across the room to let Podaxis in. It seems he managed to sneak out of the dining room after us.

"You really shouldn't have said what you said, Maisie," he says as soon as I shut the window behind him.

I shrug. "What does it matter? It's not like I can be eliminated until tomorrow night."

"What if things don't go as planned during your date with him tomorrow? What if you aren't able to…do the deed?"

"I'm going to walk up to him and shove my lips against his. It's as simple as that."

He taps a hind claw on the floor. "What if it isn't as easy as you think?"

"How hard could it be? I slip my hands into pockets and take purses straight from people's hands."

"A kiss is not the same."

"What would you know about it?"

“I’ve…studied the art.”

I smirk. “Oh? And when are you ever going to use this art you’ve so closely studied?”

“Someday.”

“With Nadia? How? As a crab or as a seelie fae?”

He taps his claws again. “I’m working on that.”

I bark a laugh, but the sound is cut off as my door swings open. My first instinct is to hide Podaxis, but he’s already scurrying under my bed. Besides, the intruder only has eyes for me.

Vanessa strides into my room, arms crossed, her face a mask of fury. “What’s your angle?”

Her chaperone rushes in behind her. “Miss Courter, this is hardly appropriate.”

“What’s inappropriate is this…this sinful creature pretending she somehow rescued Brother Dorian.” Her lips lift in a sneer.

I try to hold her gaze with defiance but I can’t keep my eyes from dipping to her neck where I notice a sparkly emerald necklace. A gold bracelet adorns her wrist, perhaps even more stunning than the necklace, with teardrop pearls dangling from it. My nose twitches at the sight of it. I curl my fingers, desperate to find a way to snatch it from her. But no, that’s not what I’m here for. To sate my urges, I bring my hand to the side of my head where my shell comb remains. It only slightly alleviates my craving for the brilliant bauble around the girl’s wrist.

The older woman wrings her hands. She whispers something in Vanessa’s ear, but all I can make out is the word *princess*.

Vanessa only scoffs. “Princess! I highly doubt that. You probably aren’t even fae, are you? I bet your ears are fake.”

“Oh, like mine,” comes another voice as Greta Garter strolls in. She taps her pointed ear. “It’s a stage prop.”

Vanessa rounds on her, and I’m relieved to see her anger directed elsewhere. “Stage prop?”

Greta nods, unperturbed by the other girl’s scorn like always. She flourishes a hand. “I’m an actress.”

“Are you fae at all?” I lift a brow, my curiosity piqued. It’s enough to override my irritation at the sight of the rest of the contestants crowding around my open door. Briony enters and leans against my wall.

Greta winks at me with a starlet's smile. How did I not recognize the look of a performer when I first saw her? "I will neither confirm nor deny these allegations."

Vanessa throws her hands in the air with a frustrated groan. Her chaperone, likely realizing her efforts to control her charge are fruitless, slowly backs out of the room. "Am I the only one taking this contest seriously? Am I the only one who truly wants to marry him?"

"I do," Agnes says in a quiet voice from my doorway. I think it's the first time I've heard her speak. It's also the first time I noticed she has pointed ears peeking beneath her pale hair coiled in a tight bun at the base of her neck. "My parents joined human society when the isle was unified, but they haven't much money or status. I have no dowry, so winning a bridal pageant is my only chance at securing a favorable match."

Josie raises her hand. "I just want to marry anyone. I'm twenty-six, the oldest of four half-fae daughters, and the only one unmarried. I would be honored to find a match in Brother Dorian."

"Well, I don't want to marry a damn soul," Franny says, pushing past the other two girls to fully enter my room. "My parents want me settled down with a man and won't hear a word against it."

"Then why are you here?" barks Vanessa.

Franny shrugs. "Hopefully not for long."

With another groan, Vanessa rounds on Greta again. "And why are *you* here? You're an actress who's clearly wealthy."

Greta lets out a tittering laugh. "No, I'm quite poor."

"You have two servants!"

"Servants? Oh, you mean my companions? No, they go to school with me. They thought this would be a fun part to play. All my clothes are from the costume department."

For the first time, I see Greta as a bit of a kindred spirit. Our personalities are different, but we do have something in common. I don't admit it, though. It's not like I came here to make friends.

"What school do you attend?" Agnes asks.

"The Borealis School of the Arts," Greta says. "You know, the performing arts university at the south end of the city. It's an expensive school and has all but bankrupted my poor mother. Which is why I must marry rich!"

Vanessa burns her with a glare, then slides her gaze to Briony. “And you?”

“I live in a convent. It’s boring. This sounded like more fun.”

“Fun! This is not fun. This is about our futures and matrimony.” Vanessa returns her attention to me, and I pin her with a glare. “Don’t even get me started on you. If you really were a princess, you wouldn’t be here in your shabby clothes trying to marry a human of the brotherhood. You’d be married to a prince, wouldn’t you?”

“Oh, I’d love a prince,” Greta says.

Vanessa ignores the comment. “I don’t believe for a moment that you’re fae or a princess or that you rescued Brother Dorian.”

I cross my arms and lean against the foot of my bed. “Believe whatever you want, it makes no difference to me.”

“Just admit it isn’t true. I know it isn’t! Otherwise, you would have said so. If you truly are fae, then you can state no lie. If you can’t admit you rescued him, then that means it’s untrue.”

I shrug. “You’re already convinced I’m not fae, so what does it matter if I say it or not?”

Briony pushes off from the wall and takes a few steps closer. “I can think of another reason she wouldn’t confess such a thing.”

Vanessa huffs. “Confess? You say it like she’d be punished. If he’s a citizen, it’s not likely to happen, especially considering she’s supposedly a princess.”

“Oh, but I thought you said I wasn’t?” I say with a smirk.

“Ooor,” Briony says, drawing out the word with a note of intrigue, “perhaps he *isn’t* a citizen.”

Vanessa blinks a few times, her conviction faltering. Still, she lifts her chin and faces the other girl. “He was coming from a mission trip in Isola.”

“Did he ever say that?” Briony asks.

“He never outright stated so,” Josie says, raising her hand again.

Greta gasps with a shake of her hips. “Oooh, you’re right! He was quite evasive, wasn’t he? Oh, I so adore a man of mystery.”

I keep my lips pursed tight. So far, I’m the only one who knows the full truth about him, and I’m determined to share none of it. If I seem to have more information than the others, it could pin me as a suspect once my mission is done.

“It makes sense,” Briony says. “What better way to secure citizenship than a rushed wedding?”

Vanessa gapes. “How dare you speak of him with such scrutiny. None of you deserve him, and I hope he sees that.”

“What makes you think *you* deserve him?” Franny asks.

“*I’m* his equal,” she says. “We share a love for the Almighty. I’m from the Church of Bretton.”

Franny gives her a hard look. “You aren’t the only one, you know.”

Vanessa wrinkles her nose. “Are you implying…”

“Yes, I too belong to the same church, you snobby fool. And you know what? I was hoping I’d be the first sent home from this stupid competition, but now I think I want to stay if only so I can last a day longer than you and laugh in your face.”

She rolls her eyes. “You are…not a nice person.”

“And you’re an asshole.”

“Swearing is a sin!”

“So is being an asshole.”

“It is not…and so is lying!”

Hands on my hips, I take a step forward and raise my voice almost to a shout. “Will everyone get out of my room?”

The bickering pair goes silent, but Vanessa turns her glower to me. I catch sight of her necklace again, which only reminds me of the tempting bracelet circling her wrist. Now I want to steal it out of spite. My nose twitches again, almost strong enough to feel like a sneeze, but I brush my comb with my fingertips and force my attention away.

Vanessa opens her mouth, but before she can speak, I do. “I don’t care what you think of me. I don’t care what you have to say or what you do and don’t believe. I don’t like you and you don’t like me, and if the rest of you don’t get out right now and let me get some sleep, then the same goes for you too.”

Agnes and Josie dart into the hall at once, followed by Vanessa with her nose in the air.

Briony gives me an approving nod, then she, Greta, and Franny leave too, closing the door behind them.

With a groan, I fall back on my bed and press my hands to my eyes. The blankets shift as Podaxis climbs up the bed and settles in next to my

shoulder. “I’ve never been so grateful in all my life to have been raised with only brothers,” I say.

He pats my arm. “I can’t say I blame you.” Silence falls between us until he speaks again, this time with a note of trepidation. “Are you ready for tomorrow? Your first meeting alone with Dorian?”

His question brings my awareness to my ever-tingling lips. I open my eyes and stare up at the ceiling, going over everything I must do. Everything I’ll be rewarded with after it’s done. An end to the curse Nimue placed on me. Freedom from her and the Sisters of the Black Eel. Better yet…freedom from my deadly magic. “Yes,” I finally say. “My first date with Dorian. And my last.”

18

The next morning, I can do very little else but pace my room as I await my meeting with Dorian. Jeremy came first thing to deliver a note with the time I'm set to meet him. Noon. That's pretty much all it said. I expected it to tell me which of the three locations it will be held at so I can come up with a clear plan. Not that the knowledge of locale would do much good, for I've only seen the garden myself, and from my bedroom window at that. Luckily, Podaxis investigated the other two locations—the parlor and the library—in secret and informed me of their layout. The library hosts several reading alcoves and bookshelves, meaning there should be plenty of hidden areas I can deliver my kiss unseen. And he says the parlor is small but provides close quarters. As for the garden…

I look out my window for probably the hundredth time that morning, studying the walking paths, the open sky above, and the walls of the church that surround the area.

"I already told you," Podaxis says, climbing upon the windowsill and tapping the glass. "The other side of that tree provides the best coverage. There are no windows on the opposite wall and there are ample shrubs on either side."

"What if there are gardeners out when we are?" I ask, nibbling my lip.

"Like I said. Shrubs. Honestly, the garden is probably the least suspicious area for your mission to occur. His untimely demise could be blamed on an outdoor allergy."

I frown at him. "Are humans allergic to the outdoors the same way fae are sensitive to ash and iron?" I shudder at the thought. Despite both

materials being illegal on the isle, all fae harbor a fear of them, for they can be lethal to us. During the first war, our weaknesses to ash and iron were discovered by the humans and they soon made weapons from them. I often wonder if my kind would have been obliterated had our two people not come to terms for peace and ended the fighting.

"Human allergies are a little different, from what I understand," he says. "It could be anything at any time, and it changes from person to person."

"How do you know—"

He gives me a pointed look. "I read the broadsheets, remember? You'd learn quite a lot if you would too."

I roll my eyes and focus my attention on the tree he indicated. It's large and wide with long, swaying branches that reach nearly to the grassy floor around it. Being raised on the beach, I never took much interest in trees, but I think this one is called a willow. If he's right about humans and allergies, then I desperately hope my meeting will be held out there. It's my best chance at avoiding suspicion.

"I should get back to my room," Podaxis says. "It's almost time, and I'll be expected to chaperone your meeting, but *not* be found within your bedroom beforehand."

I swallow hard and glance at the clock. He's right. It's a quarter until noon. All I can manage is a nod as I flip the latch and open the window.

"You'll be all right," he whispers, then begins to climb down the wall.

In his absence, the weight of my task presses heavy on my heart.

JEREMY COMES MERE MINUTES BEFORE NOON WITH PODAXIS AT HIS SIDE. I meet them in the hallway, and Podaxis offers me a greeting in a less-than-inconspicuous tone. "Your Highness! So lovely to see you today."

"Yes, Podaxis," I say, my tone far more nonchalant. "Lovely indeed."

Jeremy doesn't seem to notice and leads us down the hall. I hold my breath as we approach the doors that lead to the garden, but my stomach plummets as we bypass them completely. There goes that plan. Which means it's either the library or the parlor.

We pass the hall to the front door and the nave too, then come to a room just on the other side. Jeremy opens the door to reveal a modest space with

a couch, a tea table, and a set of chairs. This must be the parlor then. With bated breath, I enter the room with Podaxis at my side and find Dorian standing at the window. It looks out at the garden, but with a different view than mine.

He turns toward me with a stiff bow. “Your Highness.” He’s outfitted in the same black jacket and trousers as yesterday. I’m guessing they’re required to always remain in uniform.

Jeremy closes the door, leaving me, Podaxis, and Dorian alone. I should be grateful to find no one else in attendance—the brotherhood in particular—but instead, I feel as if my stomach might lurch straight out of my throat. I curl my fingers into fists to keep them from shaking, but I otherwise can’t bring myself to move as I stare at the boy before me. My mind draws a blank. Shouldn’t I curtsy? No, what am I thinking? I’m supposed to walk right up to him, frame his face with my hands, and press my lips against his. That’s how I’ve envisioned this moment over and over in my head.

It’s now or never, I say to myself. *End this now*.

With a deep breath, I gather my courage and take a step—

“We’re waiting on one more,” he says, freezing me in place. Just then, the door opens to reveal Glint McCreedy.

“So sorry I’m late,” he says and takes a seat before the fire. He wears a bright blue floral-patterned suit, his hoofed feet peeking out from the hem of his pants and polished to a brilliant shine. His orange mustache looks even curlier than it did yesterday. Crossing one leg over his knee, he opens his notebook. “Act as you would if I weren’t here. I am to document this meeting in its most natural form.”

I gape at him. How the shells am I to deliver my deadly kiss in front of a reporter? I certainly hadn’t considered his presence.

“Please, have a seat, Your Highness,” Dorian says, extending a hand toward the sitting area as he begins walking toward it.

With trembling steps, I make my way to the tea table and claim a seat on the couch. I shift as far to one end as I can.

He stares at the empty space next to me for a moment before settling down at the opposite end. His posture is stiff, his expression somber. He certainly doesn’t look like a man about to interview a potential bride. After dinner last night, I’m sure I’m at the bottom of his list of candidates anyway. He clears his throat and faces me. “Are you finding your room—

hells below, what is that?" He shoots to his feet as Podaxis climbs onto one of the empty chairs.

I look from Dorian to my friend, realizing he hadn't noticed him until now.

Glint's lips stretch into an amused grin as he scrawls in his notebook.

"Don't mind me," Podaxis says in a flat, grumbling tone. "I'm just her chaperone."

"Chaperone," Dorian echoes, shoulders tense. The way his hands are bunched at his sides makes him look as if he's prepared to fight my friend.

"Yes, my chaperone," I say, trying to sound placating so he'll sit back down. I'll never be able to proceed with my task if he's so on edge. With Glint here, I'm not sure I'll be able to proceed at all. "Podaxis is like a brother to me."

His eyes meet mine. "Your brother?"

I nod. "We grew up together, back when I was a seal."

"A seal."

I clench my jaw to keep from asking if he's capable of producing any other words than echoes of my own. "I'm a selkie."

He releases a heavy breath that seems to take some of the tension out of his shoulders. Slowly, he returns to his seat. "Forgive me, Your Highness. I was caught unaware by your…chaperone's appearance."

"Please don't call me Your Highness," I say. "My name is Maisie."

"But you're a fae princess, are you not? As you're royalty, I'm expected to address you as Highness."

"Yes, but I prefer Maisie." He says nothing, so I add, "If it makes you feel more comfortable, you may call me Miss Maisie."

"Very well," he says with a brief smile that doesn't meet his eyes. "May I pour you some tea then, Miss Maisie?"

I've never been a fan of tea and prefer water or wine, but it does give me an idea. "Yes, please."

He leans forward and pours two cups of tea. He hands one to me and takes the other for himself. My fingers tremble as I pretend to take a sip. Then I set it on the saucer and let out a little cough. Followed by another. And another. "What kind of tea is that?" I ask, my voice raspy.

Dorian's eyes go wide as he assesses his teacup. "Black?"

I make a choking sound. "Water," I say. "Mr. McCreedy, will you be a dear and fetch me water?"

The reporter pauses, his expression crumbling with disappointment. “Me?”

I nod. “Please. Freshly boiled. With salt.”

“Salt?”

“I’m a sea fae.”

The reporter narrows his eyes. Being fae himself, he might see through my ruse. It’s a risk, but one I must take. With a resigned sigh, he closes his notebook and rises. “Please cease all conversation until I return.”

I fan my face, emitting more little coughs well after Glint exits the parlor. Only when I’m certain he’s far enough away do I stop.

Dorian leans slightly forward. “Are you all right?”

“Oh, I’m feeling quite well. How silly of me.”

He watches me for a few beats. Is that suspicion in his eyes? “Shall we wait until Mr. McCreedy returns before we begin our conversation?”

I wave a hand. “There’s no need.” I inch slightly closer, trying to make it seem like I’m simply arranging my skirts more comfortably.

“As you wish,” he says, tone flat. “Miss Maisie, do you have any other brothers?”

Shells, I hate small talk. But if that’s what it takes to distract him as I slowly inch toward him...

“I do,” I say, shifting again. “I have many, actually. They live back home at Bircharbor Palace.”

“Any sisters?”

“Yes, but they are centuries older than I am and don’t live at home. I’m my father’s youngest child. But I have female selkie cousins.” It takes me a moment to realize it’s most polite if I return the question. “How about you? Any siblings?”

“I have sisters,” he says, and his eyes unfocus for a moment. “Two of them.”

I scoot closer again, but his gaze falls to my hips. I freeze. “How old are they?”

“Sixteen and fourteen.” His face is devoid of emotion, but there’s a note of something heavy hanging in his voice. Sorrow, perhaps? It makes me wonder if talk of families makes him think of his dead father. *His traitorous, fae-killing father*, I remind myself. With a shake of his head, he turns his gaze to me. “What is a Sea Princess doing in the city of Lumenas?”

His question holds no hint of reproach, but it sets me on edge regardless. Mostly because I'm not sure what to say that won't be a lie. Then again…what does it matter? It's not like he'll be around much longer to repeat what I say. My stomach turns at such a morbid thought, but I ignore it. "I've lived here for about a year."

"What do you do?"

"I…work for a theater called the Vulture's Prose."

For the first time, his eyes brighten with something close to interest. "What do you do there?"

It takes me a few seconds to find my answer. I can't help but smirk with pride when I come up with just the right phrasing that makes my next words true. "I help fund its endeavors."

"I'm intrigued," he says, and seems to mean it. Without taking his eyes off me, he sets his cup down and angles himself toward me. It seems he's growing more comfortable by the minute.

Podaxis clears his throat. "I'm…going to go take a look out the window." He leaps from the chair and scrambles across the floor as fast as I've ever seen him move. Once he reaches the window, he plants his back firmly toward me, making it impossible to witness what happens next.

That's our sign. It's time.

I scoot another inch closer to him. My blood roars in my ears and sweat beads behind my neck. The tingling in my lips intensifies while everything else inside me recoils at the thought of what I'm about to do.

He's a bad man, I say to myself.

He killed a fae.

He defended Saint Lazaro's rebellion.

And the part that matters most of all…

It's his life or mine.

"Can we speak about…the question I asked you at dinner last night?" he asks.

My stomach bottoms out. I recall our tense talk about fae salvation and his defense of the church's rebellion. If he's going to bring that up, I'm losing my chance. Furthermore, Glint McCreedy could be back any moment. "Ask me anything," I say, shifting another inch closer.

Something like nervousness crosses his face, making him look far less severe than before. "I know you said you couldn't confirm what I'd asked,

but I figured now that we're alone and without reporters…I just want to know if you…if you're her. Because I remember a girl that night."

Gathering every ounce of determination I have, I lean forward, take his face between my gloved palms, and press my tingling, burning lips—

"What are you doing?" His hands encircle my wrists, and he lightly pushes me away.

I pause with several inches remaining between our faces. My breaths grow shallow as I debate whether I should lean forward and try again. His firm grip makes me wonder if that's even possible.

Slowly, he releases my wrists and rises to his feet. "Did you…just try to kiss me?"

I keep my gaze averted, my hands falling to my lap.

He backs up and settles stiffly into the chair at the far end of the table. "I don't mean to embarrass you, Miss Maisie, but perhaps—as a fae princess—you aren't aware of human propriety."

There's so much apology in his tone, it makes me sick. My mind spins between terror, panic, and the weight of failure. Woven through it is the most incomprehensible feeling of all—that very emotion which he stated. Embarrassment. It makes heat rise to my cheeks, makes my fingers curl around the folds of my skirt. It burns hotter with every rapid beat of my heart until it almost feels like anger—a far more welcome feeling, and I take hold of it like an anchor. "Embarrassed? Me? I'm a fae princess, Brother Dorian. I'm not…why should I be embarrassed?"

His expression hardens in a flash. "Oh? Then am I to assume you were trying to trick me into ruining your reputation in private so that I'd feel honor-bound to choose you at the end of the competition?" He leans back in his chair and shakes his head. "I've heard about fae deception, Miss Maisie, and I've heard about *selkies*. The temptresses of the sea. You'll have no luck using your wiles against Saint Lazaro's brotherhood. None of us would ever be so naïve, and certainly not me."

I stammer before I can form my retort. "I wasn't…trying to trick you into ruining my reputation. The fae care far less about such things than humans do."

He rises from his chair. "Then perhaps we aren't well-matched at all. Good day to you."

Without giving me a second look, he strolls over to the door and leaves.

My heart is the only sound I hear in his absence, echoing the slam of the door. I don't even notice Podaxis until he's on my lap. "I told you it wouldn't be that easy," he whispers.

I open my mouth to argue, but there's no fire left in me. I failed. I had a plan, I followed it…and I did everything wrong.

Dorian's voice floods my mind, both his apologetic tone and the spiteful words he said after. I cringe at the way my cheeks burned when he rejected my attempt to kiss him. He thwarted my efforts to murder him, and yet I can't shake the shame of having had my kiss rebuffed.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Worst of all, I'm no closer to being free from Nimue. Her curse will kill me in six days.

And I might have just ruined everything.

19

Hours later, I'm back to pacing my room. The dinner tray Initiate Jeremy brought to me an hour ago remains untouched. My stomach is too tangled in knots to even consider food, especially with what lies next to my tray—a note stating the time of tonight's Blessing Ceremony. Eight o'clock. It's now seven-thirty, which means I only have half an hour until it begins. Tonight, Dorian will send one girl home. There's a good chance it will be me.

A frantic tapping on my window shatters my thoughts. I rush to open it. "He's going to send you home," Podaxis says as soon as the glass closes behind him. "I spied on Brother Billius speaking with Father Viktor. Billius told Viktor that Dorian has made his choice and…and…"

"And I'm being sent home." My stomach plummets deeper than it already has. With a groan, I sink onto my bed and put my head in my hands. "I have to fix this."

"How?"

I rise and return to pacing. "I must ensure he chooses someone else to go home. I…think I know what I can do." My mind spins as a plan forms in my mind. "But there's more. So much more."

Podaxis scurries back and forth across the floor to keep up with my agitated movements. "Care to share?"

I stop and face him. "Podaxis, I'm going to say something I don't often admit. You were right. I have to get *him* to kiss *me*."

"I agree with that," Podaxis says, "but I think even I underestimated his virtue. I wouldn't be surprised if someone like him would forgo kissing

until he's selected a bride, if not until his actual wedding."

I nod and start pacing yet again. "Which means I have to outlast this stupid pageant. I either need to seduce him into falling so deeply in love with me that he loosens up on propriety and kisses me in the next six days, or I must win the entire contest and let our first kiss mark his final breath."

"You make it sound quite grim," Podaxis says.

I can't say I disagree. The idea of playing with a man's heart just to murder him is enough to make me wonder if my life is even worth saving at all. If I go through with this plan, I'll forever be a bad person. But I'd rather be a bad person than a dead one. I curl my fingers, my jaw set. "I have to win."

His mouth twists into a grimace. "Can you do that?"

I shake my head. "Not with how I've handled things so far. Before now, I put in no effort. I thought this would be easy. I thought I'd be free by now and wouldn't have to worry about impressing him or wooing him or anything of the sort."

"So…you're going to woo him?"

"Yep. Which means I have a lot of work to do. I'll need more clothes, I'll need to pretend I like him—"

"Don't get ahead of yourself." He taps his pincers together. "There's still the whole matter of not getting eliminated tonight. You only have half an hour until the ceremony."

"You're right."

"Oh, I do like when you say that. It's been twice now."

"Don't get used to it." I shoot him a glare, but there's no malice in it. Not with the excitement over my new plan bubbling in my chest.

"Now it's time to do what I do best."

"Argue and refuse to listen to reason?"

"No." I grin at my friend. "Steal shiny objects."

MY CONFIDENCE REMAINS A QUARTER OF AN HOUR LATER, BUT MY BODY feels drained, thanks to my latest trip to the Twelfth Court. I walk to the other end of the hall, trying my best to act natural. Despite wishing I could curl up on my bed for the rest of the evening, I'm dressed in my nicest

outfit—the lavender evening gown Nadia selected for me. I stop outside the last room at the far end of the hall, take a deep breath, force my lips into what I hope is an even more convincing smile, and rap my knuckles against the closed door.

I hear movement from behind it, but it takes several seconds before it opens. When it does, I find Vanessa's chaperone on the other side of the threshold. "Your Highness," she says with cold politeness.

"Greetings," I say. "Might I have a word with Van—" I'm about to use her first name when I remind myself of social strictures. Since Vanessa isn't what I'd call a friend, I must address her by her surname. "Might I speak with Miss Courter?"

A glance over the older woman's shoulder reveals the girl in question. She sits demurely on her bed, reading a book in what is obviously a posture she artfully curated when I knocked. I wouldn't be surprised if her book were upside down.

She glances up at me, and her languid expression twists into a scowl. With a slam of her book, she rises from the bed and stalks over to the door. As she draws near, my gaze falls to the emerald necklace at the base of her throat. "Oh, it's you," she says. Her chaperone gives her a warning look, but Vanessa pays her no mind. Then, with a subtle curtsy, she lets Vanessa take her place at the doorway. "What do you want?"

It takes me a moment to select my words. "I'm here to apologize for us starting off on such poor terms."

She narrows her eyes. "Is that so?"

This is where she expects me to say I'm sorry, but the words are so false I can't bring myself to utter them. Instead, I lean a little closer. "Can I tell you a secret?" Her only answer is to cross her arms. I sigh, as if what I'm about to say pains me deeply. "Do you promise not to tell a soul?"

Her scowl slips and I see curiosity take its place. "Very well."

"I…ran away."

She lifts a brow. "From what?"

I sigh again, letting my eyes unfocus. "Last year, my father tried to arrange a marriage for me to a fae prince. I didn't love him, and…I ran away. I came to Lumenas instead to live a life of my own. My father doesn't know I'm here." Each word is true and falls off my tongue with ease.

"So?" She shrugs.

“I promise you, I never meant for anyone here to find out I’m a princess, or that I saved Brother Dorian. But both are true. I am Princess Maisie, daughter of King Ronan of the Sea Court, and the night Brother Dorian was shipwrecked, I escorted him across the border.”

“Why didn’t you want anyone to know?” There’s still skepticism in her eyes, but her posture has grown somewhat relaxed.

“If I confessed, I could cause a scandal and my father would learn I’m here.” While the last part is technically true, it does well to skirt around the truth.

“So…what? You wanted to try to win Brother Dorian’s heart anonymously?”

“If he knew I was both a princess and the fae who saved him, well, that would be a little unfair, wouldn’t it?”

She watches me through slitted lids, her eyes lighting on the tips of my pointed ears. “If you didn’t want anyone to know, why did that reporter have you on record for confessing both things?”

I shake my head and give a grave look. “I swear, I never said either of those things to him.” It’s true. Zara did.

“Why are you telling me this?”

I force my lips into a kind smile. “While we may not like one another, you treat me like a regular person and not like a princess. I…” I pause to sort through my words again. “I appreciate not being put on a pedestal for being royal in this competition. Even so, I ask that you please respect my privacy and not bring up the subjects I’d rather not speak of in front of others. It’s hard enough evading questions from Mr. McCreedy, not to mention Brother Dorian himself. And when the other contestants get involved…I’d just rather not have a repeat of last night’s debacle.”

She lifts her chin. “I didn’t mean for the other girls to get involved last night. It wasn’t pleasant for me, either, you know. Franny was quite rude if you recall. Did you hear what she said? She said she only wanted to stay in the competition to see me leave first. It was practically a threat.”

“I do recall,” I say, lowering my voice to a whisper. “She doesn’t seem to like you one bit.”

“You don’t have to rub it in,” she says with a scoff.

“Apologies. Well, I should get back to my room. The initiates will be here soon to escort us to the ceremony.” I take a step back, then make an

effort to pause, my gaze locked on the emerald pendant at her throat. “Miss Courter, I must say, that is a gorgeous necklace.”

Her face brightens in a haughty smile. “Thank you. It’s from my mother. She also gave me—” She freezes, her hands clamped around her empty wrist. “Where is my bracelet?”

I train my features into an expression of concern. “I haven’t seen you wearing a bracelet since I came to your door.” That’s a fact. When I last saw it, I came not to her door but walked through her bedroom wall courtesy of the Twelfth Court.

She turns to her chaperone. “Mrs. Nolan, when did you last see me with my bracelet?”

The woman stammers, shaking her head. “I don’t recall. I’m certain you had it on this morning.”

“Look for it! I can’t go to the ceremony without it.”

“I think I saw you wearing a bracelet when you came to my room last night,” I say.

She sneers at me, our temporary truce clearly evaporated. “Is that so? Well, you seem far too interested in it.”

“All I mean is that the other girls probably saw it too. Perhaps we can ask if anyone has seen it. Maybe you dropped it at some point? If anyone found it, they’d gladly return it, wouldn’t they?”

“They’d more likely pocket it and never say a word,” she mutters as she frantically turns over pillows and shakes out dresses.

“You don’t think someone would have stolen it, do you?” I keep my tone light and skeptical, as if she’s the one suggesting such a ludicrous idea. “Who would even do such a thing?”

Vanessa pauses and blinks at me a few times. Then, cheeks blazing, she storms out of her room and brushes past me down the hall. I follow hard on her heels. She stops outside Franny’s door and pounds hard. The girl’s chaperone answers, but before she can speak, Vanessa says, “Where’s Franny Delafonte?”

Franny comes to the door with a ready glower. She crosses her arms over her chest, the movement revealing a hint of gold and teardrop pearls from under the lace cuff of her gown. “What the hell—”

With a furious gasp, Vanessa surges forward and takes the girl’s hand in hers. With the other, she pulls back the cuff to expose the rest of the bracelet. “That’s mine!”

Franny blinks down at her wrist, face going pale. “Wait, no! This… this…I don’t know how this got here.”

I do, for I placed it there about five minutes before I called on Vanessa. My stomach sinks with guilt when I see the perplexed look in Franny’s eyes. But if I had to implicate anyone in a scandal, my choice was easy. Either the girl I despise the most or the one who least wants to be here.

“You vile thief. You stole it from me!” Vanessa shouts.

“I did not!”

Their voices have risen loud enough to tempt the other contestants into the hall. Briony leaves her room and sidles up next to me. “What’s going on?”

I shrug and gesture open-mouthed at the arguing pair. There’s a good chance I’m overselling my surprise, but if I am, Briony doesn’t remark on it.

Greta stands at my other side, eyes alight with excitement. “Am I too late? What did I miss?”

Footsteps sound down the hall, and I know it must be the initiates coming to escort us to the ceremony.

Vanessa stomps her foot, oblivious of her audience. “How can you lie to my face? You’re wearing it, you cow!”

Franny bares her teeth as she fidgets with the clasp. “I don’t even want this hideous piece of junk. Take it back.” She flings it at Vanessa, who catches it against her chest. Franny goes to close the door in her face, but Vanessa pushes it open.

“How dare you! You’re a thief and I want you gone.”

Franny looks the other girl up and down, lips curled in a snarl. “Who do you think you are? You have no right in deciding anything about me.”

“I can decide you’re a liar and thief just fine.”

By now, the initiates have entered the hall and stand wide-eyed before the scene. I walk over to Jeremy. “Perhaps someone should go for help before things get too heated.”

The initiate nods but makes no move to leave.

Franny’s voice rises, echoing through the hall. “Call me a thief one more time. I dare you.”

I glance at the two women. Franny stands half a foot taller than Vanessa and stares down at her with a murderous expression. Vanessa glares back, undaunted. She puts her hands on her hips. “Liar. Sinner. Thief.”

In a flash, Franny pulls her arm back and slams her fist into Vanessa's face.

"Shells," I curse under my breath. That's not exactly how I imagined things would escalate. I turn back to Jeremy. "Go get someone! Now!"

This time he springs into action. I race back to the girls and find Franny being held back by her chaperone while a sobbing Vanessa is soothed by Mrs. Nolan. My eyes flash between the two, my heart torn over whom I should console. But why should I console either of them? This is what I wanted, isn't it? Well, not exactly. I hoped either of them would make the kind of scene that could cast one or the other in great enough disfavor to save me, but I never thought someone would get hurt.

For several moments, all I can do is stare while sound rises all around me, crashing like waves upon the shore. The contestants exchange whispers, Mrs. Nolan shouts at Franny's chaperone, and now Franny and Vanessa are back to hurling insults—

"Enough!" The voice is firm and manages to quiet the cacophony. We all turn to find Father Viktor standing at the mouth of the hallway with Jeremy at his side. Brother Dorian stands just behind, taking in the scene with a hard expression. His gaze sweeps the hall, and my breath catches in my throat when his eyes land on me. I can't look at him without recalling the feel of his hands around my wrists before he pushed me away, of the sound of his voice ringing first with apology. Then scorn.

My heart pounds against my ribs and I quickly avert my gaze. It appears I'm not the only one affected by Dorian's presence. When Vanessa catches sight of him, she breaks into a sob and hides her face behind her hands—but not before I glimpse the inflamed skin around her eye where Franny punched her. I can only imagine the bruise it will leave behind.

Father Viktor leans toward Jeremy. "Tell Brother Billius to inform our audience that the Blessing Ceremony is being postponed." The boy takes off again and Viktor sweeps his gaze over the rest of us. "Now, will someone with some modicum of sense please tell me what's going on?"

20

A half-hour later, I stand with the other contestants in the nave. We're lined up in a row to one side of the altar facing rows and rows of occupied pews. I'm surprised to find the church so full of eager guests. Most appear to be human, although I spot several figures with telltale signs of fae heritage—a male with curling horns on each side of his head, a female with feathered blue wings, someone with brown bark-like skin. I scan the frontmost pew, finding Glint McCreedy already scribbling away in his notebook. He glances from the row of contestants to Brother Dorian, who stands on the opposite end of the dais, as stoic as ever. Thankfully, I can't easily see him from where I stand. If I could, I'd surely analyze his every expression and go out of my mind.

Father Viktor stands at the center of the dais. He addresses our audience and welcomes them to the Blessing Ceremony with a brief prayer. I barely hear his words as I keep my eyes downcast, my expression humble. All the while, my skin crawls with the effort it takes not to fidget. Each minute that ticks by sets me more and more on edge. My gambit with the bracelet created a greater stir than I'd intended, but I've no clue if it will be enough. After we relayed to Father Viktor the tale of what happened in the hall, he ordered us back to our rooms. I paced and paced as I awaited what would happen next. It felt like an eternity before he returned with a short lecture about how theft and violence would not be tolerated, and how Saint Lazaro's bridal contest is meant to stand above those held in other less savory establishments. "Drama for the sake of drama is not to be

encouraged," he said. And that was that. Shortly after, the initiates returned to escort us to the nave, and both Franny and Vanessa were still among us.

I hazard a glance at the two girls now. Franny stands on one side of me, stiff as a board but otherwise unreadable. Vanessa's place is at the other end, closest to Father Viktor. She wears a blue silk hat with black netting draped over half her face to obscure her bruised eye. She's far less tense than Franny, although her demure smile doesn't meet her eyes. If either of them got a worse lecture than I did, it's impossible to tell.

I turn my attention to the audience, wishing Podaxis were amongst them. Chaperones aren't required to attend the Blessing Ceremonies, and I haven't seen my friend since just before I executed my plan. He's become quite the master at hiding and spying, though, so he could be anywhere. Regardless, I could really use a friendly face right now.

"I'm so nervous," whispers Greta, standing on my other side. She's the last in the row of contestants, the only person that keeps me from feeling like our order upon the dais indicates our favor with Dorian. As far as I know, Greta has done nothing to earn his displeasure, unless he's learned of her false ears. Before I committed to stealing Vanessa's bracelet, there was a moment when I briefly considered outing her confession to wearing stage props—and most likely faking her fae heritage—but I sort of like Greta. Certainly more than Vanessa. And, unlike Franny, Greta wants to be here. Besides, it would have been much harder to appear a neutral party had I tattled on her.

"…and now, let the Blessing Ceremony commence," Father Viktor says, which sends my heart skittering all over again. Greta grasps my hand and squeals with excitement.

For the love of shells. It's time.

Viktor exchanges places with Dorian, but I don't dare look his way. Instead, I try to make my face appear hopeful, although I'd bet a thousand citrine chips I look more constipated than anything.

Dorian's voice rings out, his deep baritone carried over the audience, thanks to the impressive acoustics of the nave. "Thank you for joining me at my first Blessing Ceremony. I have enjoyed getting to know these lovely contestants in my efforts to find my bride."

I try not to wrinkle my nose at how flat his tone is. Am I the only one who notices? He doesn't sound like an enthusiastic lover at all. I suppose it makes sense, though. He doesn't want to marry a fae bride. To him, it's a

necessary evil to guarantee citizenship, all so he can claim his inheritance—the legacy of his vile father. A man whose steps Dorian is following. The reminder helps soothe my nerves, ease my breathing.

I'm here for a reason. I need to stay for a reason. I stole that bracelet and got an insufferable girl punched in the face for a reason.

This time, when I try to look hopeful, I'm pretty sure I do.

Dorian speaks again. "I will now select the women who will be continuing on to tomorrow's round of events."

Brother Billius joins Dorian at the center of the dais, cradling a bundle of lilies.

"I have six pink stargazer lilies and one plain white lily," Dorian says. "Those I hand a stargazer lily will be staying. She who receives the white lily will leave tonight with my fondest thanks and farewell."

"A lily," Greta whispers with a note of disappointment. "I received a hat for every round I passed in *Who Wants to Marry a Milliner*."

I swallow hard, unable to respond. Meanwhile, the figures in the audience shift in their seats, many leaning forward with eager expressions.

Dorian steps to the edge of the dais with a pink lily in his hand, then turns toward us with a tight-lipped smile. "Vanessa Courter."

My stomach sinks as Vanessa all but skips up to him and accepts her lily. Shells. It seems her reaction to having her bracelet stolen wasn't enough to warrant her elimination from the contest. That still leaves Franny though…

Vanessa flits over to Father Viktor. The priest places a hand on her shoulder and mutters a prayer. That must be the *blessing* portion of this whole Blessing Ceremony. After that, he ushers her to the other end of the dais where she grins like an otter who got the best oyster.

Dorian announces the next names far too fast for my liking. Josie Richmond. Agnes Breene. Briony Rose. They all receive the beautiful stargazer lilies. Franny, Greta, and I remain. For one fleeting moment, I wonder if perhaps we really are standing in order from most to least favored. Maybe Podaxis heard wrong. Maybe Greta is the one going home —

"Greta Garter," Dorian says, a pink lily in hand.

My stomach lurches as Greta turns to me with a gasp before strutting to Dorian like a starlet accepting a bouquet after a play. She takes the lily and turns toward the audience, waving and smiling. A flash bulb illuminates the

dais, courtesy of Sam Sputnik and his camera. She's certainly popular with the crowd. So much so that it takes some prodding from Father Viktor to get her over to the other side of the dais for her blessing.

"Princess Maisie."

My heart stops. I hadn't been prepared to hear the next name called, much less the sound of mine on Dorian's lips. Heat flushes my cheeks as the attention of the audience shifts to me. My gaze falls to the lily in his hand, but there's not one. There are two.

One pink.

One white.

And that wicked bastard is giving no indication which is meant for me.

My eyes meet his and I find no mirth in them.

"Go," Franny whispers, elbowing me in the side. It's then I realize I haven't moved.

On legs that feel like water, I make my way toward Dorian, each step feeling like both an eternity and a too-short instant. Once I reach him, there's no going back. Either I'm eliminated with no way to complete my mission, or I stay. To the end. Until I win Dorian's brittle heart and get him to seal his own fate with a kiss.

I stop before him, my heart in my throat, sweat beading at my brow. The heady fragrance of lilies fills my senses. My gaze locks on the two flowers. He hands me one and I accept it with trembling fingers, shuddering as his fingers brush mine. Or did mine brush his? I stare at the lily, and it takes me several seconds to register its color. When I do, my eyes fly to his. "It's pink," I say before I can stop myself.

A corner of his mouth curls. It's one of those rare hints of mirth that appear on that stern face of his. "Would you prefer the white one?"

"No!" I rush to say. "No. Thank you."

With a short bow, he gestures toward Father Viktor. I fumble, almost bowing back before I remember *I'm* the royal. Instead, I nod and rush to Viktor. He rests his hand on my shoulder and states his prayer. No sooner than I take my place next to the other girls do I see Franny standing before Brother Dorian.

"I'm sorry, Franny Delafonte, but this is where we part ways."

She stands tall and extends her hand for the white lily.

He gives it to her but places his other palm over the back of her hand. "I admire your strength," he says so quietly I almost miss it.

Her expression brightens, then Brother Billius approaches to escort her away.

AN HOUR LATER, I LIE ON MY BACK STARING AT THE CEILING, PINK LILY clutched to my chest. I hear a clacking on my window, and glance up to see Podaxis pulling it open. I left it slightly ajar, hoping he'd come…and preferring not to leave my bed for the rest of the evening. After the tense day I've had, I can hardly stand to think, much less move.

He scuttles over the sill and closes the glass behind him. "I've never been so anxious in all my life," he says as he climbs up my bed next to me. "When he left you and Franny for last…I thought I'd faint." He lets out a low whistle and settles onto my pillow.

I angle my head toward him. "You watched the ceremony?"

"I was sitting with Nadia in the back."

This brings me darting upright. I cross my legs and face my friend. "Nadia was there?"

"Mr. Tuttle too. They wanted to see how you fared. They were quite surprised to hear you referred to as Princess Maisie."

I release a groan. "How am I supposed to face them now? I was planning on asking Nadia for more clothes tomorrow."

"Oh, she's already a step ahead. She told me she's altered four more outfits and said that if you don't come by to get them, she'll send Klaus and Stanley dressed as elegant lady's maids to bring them to you."

"She did?"

He snorts a laugh. "I think it's time to admit she's your friend."

I nibble my lip. Perhaps he's right. I always thought of Podaxis as my only friend and never set out to get close to anyone from the theater. With my dark secrets and the Assassin Queen on my tail, it seemed too dangerous. But now…now Nimue knows where I am. Many of my most guarded secrets remain, but at least I don't have to hide who I am. Could I possibly…make friends now?

I smother my hope with the reminder that there is no future for me. Not unless I succeed at my mission.

“Fine, I’ll go to the theater tomorrow after my date with Dorian. Hopefully I’ll find out when—”

“What do you mean your date with Dorian?” Podaxis says. “Were you not listening to Father Viktor? Instead of individual meetings, there will be a public spectacle. A…what did he call it? A Demonstration of Feminine Accomplishment.”

I furrow my brow. To be honest, I tuned out everything that happened after I received my lily. I was too shocked and relieved to pay attention to anything but my swirling thoughts. “What the bloody shells is a Demonstration of Feminine Accomplishment?”

Podaxis shrugs. “I suppose you are to show what makes you an accomplished young lady.”

“Like a talent show? The ones they hold on Halley Street?”

“How should I know?”

“Shells.” My eyes go unfocused. “What talents do I have?”

“Pickpocket. Lying despite being full fae. Getting girls kicked out of pageants. Inciting violence.”

I give him a pointed look. “I’m serious.”

He taps his hind claws. “We’ll have to think of something. Oh! I almost forgot to tell you. Brother Billius proposed to Franny Delafonte before she left!”

“Did he now?” I say, although it shouldn’t surprise me. It’s clear the church is desperate to pair more of its brothers with wives. “What did she say?”

He scoffs. “She refused, of course. I’m surprised she didn’t punch him in the face too. The girl seemed more than happy to be free of this place.”

“I do remember her saying she never wants to marry.” For a moment, my heart sinks with my familiar companion named guilt. Even though I targeted Franny because I knew I wouldn’t feel so bad if she was forced to leave, I can’t deny that I wronged her. I got her accused of theft. At least she held her own. I recall what Dorian said to her when he gave her the lily—that he admired her strength. I’m not sure how to feel about that. On one hand, it seemed a kindness, a way to demonstrate that he respected her despite his decision to eliminate her from the competition. On the other hand, his admiration of a girl who gives another a black eye makes me think of his father and his repulsive fighting ring. Perhaps it wasn’t kindness that

promoted Dorian to say such a thing but a sick obsession with violence. He is of the Order of Strength, after all.

I shake the thoughts from my head and return my attention to my friend. “How are you learning so much intel, anyway? Are you spying in everyone’s windows?”

“I’m a good climber and an even better hider,” he says defensively. Then he clacks his pincers together, his tone softening. “You’re my best friend, Maisie. I’ll do whatever I must to help you, no matter how ill your mission makes me feel.”

My heart cracks a little at that. For not the first time, I wonder if I deserve such a friend like Podaxis. A brother connected not by blood but loyalty. Before I get too sappy, I force a grin. “I’m glad to hear you say that. Because tomorrow I’m going to need your help.”

21

The next morning, I stand near my slightly ajar door, awaiting the sound of clacking claws. When I hear none, I check my reflection in the mirror. Without many other options, I wear the same outfit I wore the day I arrived—my tartan skirt and lace blouse with its long, puffed sleeves. I smooth out the folds of my skirt, then try to do the same to my hair. It doesn't work, of course, much to my growing irritation.

Up until now, I've loved my short pink tresses, but with my intention to impress Dorian weighing heavy on my mind, I can't help noting how different I look from the other girls. My hair is neither long and smooth nor curled and orderly—the two most common styles I've come to recognize, and in almost all cases, fixed in some sort of updo that looks like it was arranged by magic. Instead, my cotton-candy hair floats in haphazard waves around my face, and the only part that stays in place is the section pinned up by my stolen shell comb. Even that is surrounded by loose tendrils that are either too thin or too short to stay with the rest.

"He's alone and the coast is clear," Podaxis says, making me jump. "Hurry!"

Giving up on taming my appearance, I grab the paper bag off my dresser and rush into the hall after my friend. The women's wing is thankfully empty, and as I follow behind Podaxis, I find no one else outside it. It was the same earlier this morning, when Podaxis guided me along a route he insisted is the best way to sneak in or out of the church without being noticed.

Podaxis turns a corner and heads down a staircase. "He's down here."

“Where is…here?”

“How should I know? It’s some place where people hit things.”

“Hit things?” I echo, but Podaxis pays me no mind as we continue down the stairs. I clutch the paper bag closer to my chest, its contents warm and comforting. A strange smell greets me as we near the bottom of the stairs. Something not quite as terrible as an alleyway garbage bin, but less pleasant than a beach on a hot day. Like a beach, it holds a similar quality of salt in the air…

The room beyond comes into few, and my heart lurches as I find Dorian at the center of it.

Shirtless.

My eyes widen as I watch the muscles flex and strain on his back, bronze skin glistening with sweat as he pounds his fists into a weird firm-but-squishy bag of sorts. It hangs from the rafters and is almost as tall as Dorian himself. He shuffles forward and back, jabbing the bag again and again. I gulp, unable to look away as I whisper furiously at my friend. “Why the shells did you bring me down here?”

“You said you wanted to get him alone.”

“Yes, but did you not think he should be wearing clothes?”

Podaxis looks from me to Dorian. “He’s wearing trousers.”

I clench my jaw, fully prepared to dart back up the stairs. Then Dorian halts and looks over at me with surprise.

Eyes narrowed, he approaches on swift feet. “What are you doing here? You aren’t to leave the women’s wing unaccompanied by your initiate.”

“That’s my cue to leave,” Podaxis says as he scrambles up the stairs.

I cast a glare at my retreating friend, then face Dorian as he closes the distance between us. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to intrude.” I back up a step but trip as my heel comes against the bottom stair. My other leg gives out. I reach back, nearly losing my bag as I try to catch myself—but someone else catches me first.

I find Dorian standing a mere foot away, one hand around my upper arm, the other at my waist. He moves the hand from my waist as quickly as if he were scalded but waits until I plant my feet before releasing my arm. My skin feels hot beneath my sleeve and blouse, burning where he momentarily touched me. I reason it must be because he’s so warm, the evidence being the glistening beads of moisture that trickle down his face,

his hair, his neck, his…chest. Now I know what that salty pungent smell was. It's sweat. And for some reason, I'm not at all repulsed by it.

My nose twitches as my eyes lock on the firm musculature of his torso, and I feel a sneeze coming on. Shells, not again. Wasn't sneezing in his face once enough? I hold my breath to stifle it, willing myself to look away from him. But I'm too transfixed. Podaxis was right when I first pulled him from the sea. That sure isn't blubber on his bones, yet I find myself captivated by it just the same. His skin bears pale scars here and there, and I wonder what they're from. Then I notice one scar that's much more severe than the rest. Over the curve of one shoulder, a patch of flesh about as large as my fist is marred with jagged scar tissue. My eyes wander down the rippling front of his stomach, ending at the waist of his cream linen pants. I'm surprised to see him in something other than the black trousers of his uniform. Unlike the starchy black he normally wears, the material is light and thin, gently hugging his thighs before tapering at the knee. Below that, I find firm, shapely calves—

He clears his throat, and I force my eyes to his, my cheeks burning. Oh, for the love of the shells, why was I looking at his legs? Or any part of him? He reaches for me, and I flinch. Only to find he's not reaching for me at all but something on the wall next to the door. When he steps back, he has a cloth in his hand and begins wiping down his face. I grit my teeth as I catch sight of the smirk playing over his lips. When his gaze next meets mine, he repeats his question. "What are you doing here?"

I take a deep breath, inhaling the salty aroma wafting off his skin, and shove my paper bag between us. "I came to bring you this."

He pauses in the middle of drying off his hair and lifts a brow at my offering. "What is it?"

"Lumies. I…I remember you saying you'd never had them, so I brought you some from the vendor across the street."

"You snuck out of your room and broke church rules to get me a gift? How kind." I can't quite tell, because his stupid face remains ever impassive, but I'm pretty sure he's being sardonic. Still, he takes the bag from me. Slinging the sweat-soaked cloth over one shoulder, he peers inside the bag. The smell of sugar and cardamom mingle with the salt in the air. His expression softens, as does his posture.

I wring my hands. "It's a peace offering. I only hope you don't think too badly of me after what happened yesterday."

“That would imply I think of you at all,” he says dryly.

I bristle, tempted to storm away, but his lips twitch into something like a grin. Is he teasing? Refusing to acknowledge the jab, I proceed with the remainder of my well-rehearsed speech. “I wanted to apologize for…for how I behaved. And to thank you for not sending me home.”

He lifts his head halfway, peering at me through slitted lids. Perhaps I shouldn’t have hinted that I knew he’d planned on eliminating me.

And yet, he says nothing, making my pulse race as he continues to stare at me. I bite my lip, then force my next words out. “I’m sorry.” My apology is true, but only because my actions nearly cost me my mission.

He shifts his stance and lifts his chin, gazing down at me from under his lashes. “Why did you do it? Why did you try to kiss me?”

The blood leaves my face. That’s not something I can confess. But I can evade the truth with that of a different kind. “You were right when you said I don’t know much about human propriety. I was raised most of my life as a seal.”

“Right,” he says. “A selkie temptress.”

“A *selkie*,” I say, enunciating the word, “who rarely removed her sealskin. This past year has been my first living exclusively in seelie form, and much of my time has been spent at the theater I work for. I confess, it isn’t the most proper environment for an unmarried young woman, but I hope you can forgive me for it.”

He crosses his arms, and it takes all my restraint not to admire his muscles again. “Why did you join the contest?” he asks. “Why do you seek to marry me?”

That’s another question I can’t answer. I take a deep breath. “Can I answer something else instead?”

After a pause, he nods.

“I did rescue you. On the evening of the seventh, I was at Cape Vega and spotted a shipwreck and a fire. I didn’t think there were any survivors, but when I saw you trying to swim for shore, I went out to help you.”

His stern mask cracks, making him look unsure. Youthful. The way he looked right before I tried to kiss him in the parlor yesterday. His brows knit together. “Why?”

I wring my hands again but force them still. It takes me a few moments to set aside everything that has happened since that night, everything I’ve learned about him, and everything I still must do. When I find my words,

they're true. "I saw you drowning and everything in my heart told me that saving you was the right thing to do."

His expression softens more than I've ever seen, his lips curling into a sad smile.

I return it, my lips mirroring his. For a moment, that feeling I felt on the cliff returns. The conviction that I was about to do what was right. To make my father proud. To make myself proud. For a single inhale, I pretend I still feel that way. For one exhale, I let myself forget that he still must die.

"I'm sorry too," he says, surprising me. He looks down at the floor between us. "I…was too hard on you. I rushed into an assumption and spoke it aloud. If I were a gentleman, I would have pretended it didn't happen and guided our meeting in a different direction. I never should have confronted you about…doing what you did or insinuated that you were embarrassed or that you had ill intent."

I note how he says *if* he were a gentleman. Does that mean he doesn't consider himself to be one?

He continues. "I haven't lived in Faerwyvae for many years now, and I confess my experiences with the fae have rarely been positive."

My heart hardens, smothering my momentary fantasy. As much as I know I should say nothing more, I can't help but voice my next question if only to discover what he'll say. "Why do you want to marry a fae, then?"

He sighs and meets my eyes again. His voice is lower than it was before, hushed with secrecy. "You, more than anyone, can piece together the answer. You rescued me. You knew to take me to Saint Lazaro, which means I must have begged you for sanctuary."

"You don't remember?"

"I remember someone coming to my rescue. I remember a woman looking down at me with moonlight in her hair." His eyes take on a distant quality, but he quickly shakes it away. "That was you, I suppose. And it's the last thing I remember. The next thing I knew, I was in the church's infirmary. I promise you, I had no intention of illegally crossing the border. I was meant to dock at Vanmar Island and secure citizenship the official way. But now…now, you must know the rest."

I say nothing, keeping the truth unsaid. We both know he has only days left before his term of sanctuary expires. Then the fae will have the right to collect him, imprison him, and punish him for crossing. Unless, of course,

he marries someone with at least half-fae blood and becomes a citizen, a legal pact sealed with a kiss of his new bride's lips.

My lips.

His death.

My freedom.

"Thank you. I owe you a great debt."

I stand taller, tilting my lips into a playful grin. "I wouldn't say that if I were you. It sounds far too much like the beginning of a bargain, and surely you know better than to bargain with a fae."

"Then perhaps we can find something else to even the score." His tone is hardly suggestive, but the smirk returns to my lips. It makes him seem so unlike the stiff, emotionless man I've seen him as. The glint in his eye brings fire to my core, one that has me feeling bolder.

"Perhaps," I say, then turn away from him. Before I take a step, I glance over my shoulder, finding his eyes have strayed to my backside, something that has my belly thrilling further. "Enjoy your Lumies."

He holds my gaze until I break it and march up the stairs. It's all in my head, I know, but I can't help imagining his eyes following my every step until I'm out of sight.

The breathless feeling in my chest, however, is far too real.

22

"Enjoy your Lumies," Podaxis mimics in a high-pitched voice once I reach the top of the stairs where he waits.

I purse my lips to hide the traitorous smile that had somehow sprung up there, my cheeks burning as he snickers at me. "Were you listening the entire time?"

"Of course I was. I had to make sure he didn't try to pummel you to death like that fighting bag."

I cross my arms. "No, you didn't. I wasn't in any trouble."

"Not when you can flirt your way out of it."

"I wasn't…" I try to say that I wasn't flirting, but the last word won't come out. Does that mean I was? Well, I suppose it would be a way to get the job done. When he snickers again, I burn him with a glare. "I don't want to talk about it. If you're so great at being my lookout, why don't you tell me if the way outside is clear?"

That only wipes about half the mirth off his crabby face as he scuttles off and down the hall.

Once he returns, we make our way back the way we came until we reach the garden. There we cut through to the other side. There are no gardeners out at the moment, but still, we skirt around the perimeter of the garden, avoiding the view of the windows. Finally, we make our way out the door at the opposite wall. I pause while Podaxis checks inside the hall, then we exit through a side door that lets out to the alley behind Cygnus Street. It's the same route I took earlier when I snuck out to buy Dorian his

Lumies. Turns out my friend is right. He's discovered the perfect way to get in and out of the church while drawing the least amount of attention.

"To the Vulture's Prose?" he asks, glancing up at me.

"Yes, good sir," I say in a mocking gentlemanly tone. "To the theater we go." I lift him in my arms, and my first instinct is to tuck him into my nonexistent satchel. Then I remember there's no more reason to hide. I've already been found. So I clutch my little friend to my chest and head for the mouth of the alley.

THERE'S SOMETHING NOSTALGIC ABOUT ORION STREET NOW THAT I HAVEN'T been here in days. The rundown shops, the underpopulated sidewalks, the strains of music floating out of open doors from practicing bands… somehow these things have joined waves and salt and sandy beaches as what I'd label *comforting*. Perhaps a better word is *home*.

I open the door to the Vulture's Prose and find movement on the stage. My eyes lock on Nadia suspended midair on her aerial hoop. She's dressed in a purple velvet leotard and hose, her short black hair still set in their curling pins. With smooth, sinuous motions, she shifts positions on the hoop, hooking her legs over the top, and begins to dangle upside down.

"Oh, for the love of all things glorious," Podaxis mutters, still in my arms. I set him down and we approach the stage.

"Already up practicing?" I ask.

"I was hoping you'd come." She gives us an upside-down grin then winks at me. "Your Highness."

I put my hands on my hips. "Don't you dare start with that. There's a reason I never confessed my royal title. If you call me anything but Maisie or Pearl, I'll never speak to you again."

She snorts a laugh, then with uncanny grace, she unhooks her legs, turns over, and slides from the hoop. I don't know how she manages to move like a mermaid through the air like that. "Very well, Pearl. Come see the clothes I picked out for you. You too, Dax."

"Dax?" I say under my breath, smirking at Podaxis.

"Not a word, Maisie," he mutters. If his carapace could blush, I'm sure it would now. Instead, his mushrooms on his back begin to subtly glow. Is

that his way of showing supreme embarrassment?

We follow Nadia backstage, and I'm relieved Klaus and Stanley appear to be sleeping. I'm guessing they too have learned of my true identity, and I'd like to avoid answering any questions about it if I can help it. Although, I am pleased to see Mr. Tuttle awake and sitting at his desk. I pause next to him, nodding at Podaxis and Nadia to go to the dressing room without me. "I'll catch up," I say to them.

"Pearl!" Mr. Tuttle exclaims, whirling around in his chair at the sound of my voice. "Or should I call you—"

"No, you should not." I grin down at him and prop an elbow on his shoulder. "You'll treat me the same as you ever did before. And just to prove to you I'm still the same Pearl…" I reach into my skirt pocket and pull out a silver necklace I stole on the way here. Turns out dressing like a pretty, well-to-do girl makes me just as invisible as when I wear threadbare boys' clothes.

Mr. Tuttle takes the necklace with a wide smile, and I know at once whom he's thinking of selling it to. "Ah, this is a nice one."

I shake my finger at him. "Don't you dare take less than twenty citrine chips from Madame Lillian for that."

"Very well," he says and tries to hand me a few chips in return.

"Keep them," I say. "That was a gift. You know, because I'm not around this week." My heart lurches, and I refuse to consider what happens *after* this week. Where will I go once I'm free?

Mr. Tuttle seems to have the same thoughts but for different reasons. His eyes turn down at the corners while his smile remains. "A dusty theater is no place for a princess. Nor is being a collector of *found treasures*."

I lift a corner of my lips in a smirk. "I thought being a royal meant I could do whatever I wanted."

"But is this really what you want to do?"

My expression falls. I can't answer his question because I haven't thought that far. I've only just begun to entertain what freedom means to me. I force my grin to return. "I should join Nadia and Podaxis." I give the old man's shoulder an affectionate squeeze and then make my way to the dressing room.

I open the door and at first can't see either of my friends over the rows of clothing racks. Then I spot them toward the back, facing away from me. Podaxis clings to the top rail of one of the racks while Nadia holds out a

waistcoat and slacks in gray plaid. I'm confused why Nadia has selected what is clearly a man's outfit for me when she previously insisted I dress like a fine lady. Then it hits me. I see it in the way Podaxis nods, and more so in the bright glow coming from his mushrooms, the pinks, blues, reds, and greens shining with bioluminescence.

Podaxis doesn't glow when he's embarrassed.

He glows when he's in love.

And the suit Nadia is holding isn't for me but *him*.

My eyes sting with sudden tears and I feel like my heart is being cleaved in two. Not out of upset or jealousy, but the strangest, happiest kind of sorrow that I've never felt before.

After all my teasing, my best friend, my adopted brother, the person I care about more than anyone else, is truly and deeply in love.

Does Nadia know? He must have asked her to make clothes for him, but does she know why? Does she realize what it means? My friend has never taken seelie form, but if he's asking for clothes, it means he wants to try. He wants to become seelie…for her.

And oh, for the love of shells if that doesn't make me want to burst into happy tears like an idiot.

I now have another reason to succeed at my mission. If I fail and die from Nimue's curse, Podaxis' heart will break, and I fear he won't have enough love left after to share with Nadia. And if I give myself up and join my mother's vile Sisters of the Black Eel, he'll follow me. I know he will. Which leaves only one option.

Freedom. Success at my mission.

Killing Dorian.

"Are you ready to see your new clothes?" Nadia asks.

I blink a few times, realizing I'm still hovering near the doorway. Podaxis is suddenly nowhere to be seen, but I'm almost positive the curtain to the changing closet is moving. Is my friend trying to shift *right now*? The thought is almost too exciting—or maybe terrifying—to bear. I swallow my curiosity and try not to reveal my emotions as I approach Nadia. I've never been a hugger, but everything inside me wants to wrap my arms around the girl and squeeze tight while telling her how happy I am for her. Then maybe threaten to pull a Franny Delafonte and blacken her eye should she ever dare break my friend's heart. Instead, I settle for a crooked smile and

crossed arms. “Show me what dreadful outfits I’ll be forced to parade about in now.”

With an excited squeal, she begins laying out articles of clothing. Two new skirts with matching jackets, two blouses with puffed sleeves, a pale blue evening gown, a violet ballgown, and a long plum coat lined with sable fur at the collar, hem, and sleeves. Everything appears to be gently worn, but even to me—someone who would rather wear trousers and a loose blouse all day—they look stunning. “Thank you, Nadia.”

“I’m not done yet.” She shuffles over to one of the clothing racks and retrieves a familiar dress, one long and slinky in shimmering shades of pink, blue, and white, draped with strands of pearls. “This should be your wedding gown.”

I scoff. “I can’t wear that to a wedding. Did you forget this pageant is being thrown by a church?”

She shrugs. “Wear it to your honeymoon then.”

“My honeymoon?”

“I assume you’ll be taking one,” she says with a sly look. “With a fortune like his, he’ll take you somewhere grand. Or at least to a fine hotel on Halley Street. This will have him undressing you in no time.”

Fire heats my cheeks at the images her words conjure. But it isn’t me I imagine getting undressed. His sweat-soaked skin is all I can think of, the way his muscles shifted and strained when he punched the bag—

I blink the thoughts away. It takes me a moment to clear my voice enough to speak. “What makes you think I’ll even make it to the final round? He could eliminate me any day now.”

“Oh, come now. Even Pessimistic Pearl must have hope if she’s allowed me to provide such a grand wardrobe. Besides, I saw the way he looked at you at the ceremony. Just because I was all the way in back with Dax doesn’t mean I missed the heat between the two of you.”

I snort. “You’re delusional if you think there’s anything even lukewarm between us.”

She lays the shimmery dress with the rest of my clothes and takes a seat at the vanity where she begins removing her hairpins. Each one she unravels leaves a stunning tight wave behind in her dark hair, not a strand longer than chin length. “Then why were you the only one he looked at for longer than a split second?”

“I’m sure he…looked at everyone just the same.”

“No, when he handed you the lily, he held your gaze so long, I thought the entire audience would start shouting *scandal*. You could hear a pin drop as everyone watched with awe. Then his fingers brushed yours…” She lets out a dreamy sigh as she releases the last hairpin.

I roll my eyes. “You’re exaggerating.”

“Give me one good reason why else he’d look at you like that when he barely gave the other girls more than a fleeting glance. Aside from Miss Delafonte, of course. He seemed kind to the girl he sent home, but there was no passion there. But you! There’s something stirring indeed.”

I shift my stance, debating whether I should tell her the truth.

Nadia must see it in my eyes, for she meets mine in the mirror. “Out with it, Pearl! What happened?”

“He only acted differently with me because…because I was almost the one he sent home.”

“Why do you think that?”

I nibble my lip. “Because I tried to kiss him.”

Her mouth falls open as she turns to fully face me, eyes bright with amusement. “You little harlot!”

“It didn’t go well. He was really upset about it.”

She shrugs. “You probably just wounded his pride, that’s all. You’ve got to let him kiss *you*.”

“That’s exactly what I told her,” comes Podaxis’ voice. He shuffles out from behind the dressing curtain in his unseelie form. I can’t help but feel a pang of disappointment. Was I wrong about him trying to shift?

I return my attention to Nadia. “It’s stupid that I should have to wait to be kissed by a man, but it’s true. At least when it comes to him. I know that now.”

“Well, I have just the things for that.” She rifles through boxes and boxes of little tubs and compacts, then hands one to me. “Cosmetics.”

Wrinkling my nose, I take the tub of coral-pink paste. I despise cosmetics. So much so, in fact, that when Father sent me to try and woo the Unseelie Prince of Lunar, I procured a rather convenient glamour woven to a pair of glass-heeled shoes. It made it so that whenever I wore them, I appeared perfectly coiffed and painted. Not a strand of hair out of place or a freckle to be seen. Unfortunately, I left said glamour behind for a down-on-her-luck servant girl named Ember to wear so that I could escape the palace without notice. I often wonder what became of her…

“Rouge for the lips and cheeks,” Nadia says, stealing me from my thoughts. “Just a dab will give you an enticing glow. Then you just bat your lashes like this.” She demonstrates, one hand on her hips while she juts out her chest. Her lips pull into a pout. “And pucker your lips when you smile. You’ll have him kissing you in no time.”

I haven’t the slightest clue how anyone can pucker their lips and smile at the same time, but I’ll leave that to the experts. And she is clearly the expert as Podaxis has returned to glowing again while he stares up at her.

“What else can I get you, Pearl?” Nadia asks. “I’ll pack you a pair of silk gloves, another pair of shoes—”

“Do you think I have a talent?”

She tilts her head to the side. “I’m sure you have many.”

“But I need one for the Demonstration of Feminine Accomplishment.”

“Well, what do you know how to do?”

I shrug. “Steal. I can swim, but I don’t have my sealskin.”

I’m glad she doesn’t ask me to elaborate about the last part. I’m sure by now she knows exactly who and what I am. “Do you sing?”

I shake my head.

“Play an instrument?”

“No.”

“Needlework? Reading? Have any impressive fae magics?”

Again, I shake my head. I suppose the magic part I have, but I can’t exactly show the audience how I freeze time and enter the spirit realm. Well, I guess I could, but I doubt my disappearing act would do much to impress a brother who already feels wary of the fae.

Nadia throws her hands in the air. “What are they even teaching princesses these days?”

“I didn’t have the most princessy upbringing.”

She barks a laugh. “Clearly. That means we need to come up with something fast. You said you’re good at swimming, and we all know you’re an excellent thief. So your grace is what we must capitalize on.”

“You think I’m graceful?”

She hesitates before answering, and when she does, it comes out more like a question. “Yes? I think you absolutely can be. How do you feel about the lyra?”

I furrow my brow. “Lyra?”

“My aerial hoop. How do you feel about it?”

“Desperate,” I say with a grin. “Can you teach me to use it by this evening?”

23

Later that night, I sit in the frontmost pew in the nave next to the other contestants while the Demonstration of Feminine Accomplishment begins. Josie Richmond sits at a piano bench on the dais playing a lovely tune. Sweat pools under my armpits and I have to sit on my hands to keep them from shaking. I haven't the slightest clue what order we'll perform in. Josie is the first to go, but any moment could be my turn.

My turn to make a total fool of myself if I'm not careful.

I'm dressed in a gold leotard with ruffled sleeves and a thin chiffon skirt that reaches just past my knees. Nadia insisted I forgo the skirt, but I felt too underdressed in just the leotard. I've covered my scandalously tight outfit in my new plum coat for now, but it only aggravates my rising temperature. Nadia and Podaxis are somewhere amongst the audience, but I haven't seen them since Nadia delivered the aerial hoop and saw to it being properly hung. I've given up craning my neck to look behind me as even the slightest movement makes my muscles scream in protest. Turns out Nadia makes the hoop look easy when it is quite strenuous indeed. Before I left the theater to sneak back to the church, I managed to learn a very brief routine that she and Podaxis deemed *not bad*. Which is all I ever expected of myself. Now I can only hope it's enough to not get me sent home at the end of the night. With the Blessing Ceremony happening immediately after our performances, there will be no further opportunity to steal into Dorian's good graces.

I glance across the aisle at the pew he sits in next to Father Viktor, Brother Billius, and a couple of the other brothers. I believe I recognize

Brother Christopher, the man who sat next to me at dinner. Behind them sits Glint McCreedy, his notebook open, pen at the ready. While I've avoided reading the papers since the contest began—because, let me just be honest, why start reading them now?—I cringe at the thought of what he might say about me tonight.

Forget seals jumping through hoops. Princess Maisie dangles like a fish on a hook!

Royals. They're just like us! Or worse, because this one isn't just awkward. She's highly uncoordinated too.

I look back at the stage and feel my shoulders scream at the movement. With a wince, I rub my neck. Being no adequate judge of fine music, I watch Josie's performance without really hearing it. Instead, I go over my routine in my head over and over.

I can do this, I tell myself. *I'm a graceful selkie. I move through air like water*.

Josie's song comes to an end and the audience breaks into polite applause. Father Viktor steps onto the dais to announce the next contestant and I'm torn between dread and hope. Half of me wants nothing more than to get this over with while the other half would rather the building come down in a blazing fire before I'm forced onto that dais.

As fate would have it, I'm not called up next. Nor after that. Instead, Agnes shows off her impressive needlework of birds and pixies, followed by Vanessa reading a very long and boring passage of scripture. Then it's Greta who performs a dramatic monologue. Finally, Briony takes the stage and does a comical waltz with an invisible partner.

My heart feels like it will fly out of my throat as Briony finishes her dance, knowing I'm next. Not just next but last. Once again, I wonder if our order has anything to do with favor. Am I still last in the running for Dorian's heart? I brought him Lumies, for shells' sake!

Briony leaves the dais and Father Viktor takes her place. The blood leaves my face as I watch the lyra being lowered from the rafters. It stops five feet above the ground, low enough that I can reach it without having to jump. Even so, I'll have to perform an acrobatic feat just to get on it. It's part of the routine, the move that I probably mastered best, but it still makes me feel like I'll be sick.

By the time Viktor calls my name, I'm a sweating, shaking mess. He returns to the pew next to Dorian, and Initiate Jeremy takes a seat at the

piano. Thankfully, I was able to rope him into providing music for my routine. He places his fingers on the keys and a familiar, jaunty tune begins to play, one I'm sure everyone is familiar with. I, of course, didn't hear it until I came to Lumenas, but I've heard it almost every day since, blaring from stages and street corners. Nadia insisted something familiar would help me fix my routine to the beat, so here we are.

And here I am stuck to my seat. Someone elbows me in the side, and I turn to find Greta with a wide smile urging me off the pew. With a deep breath, I force myself to move, to stand, and shrug off my coat. The cool air that touches my skin in the coat's absence comes as a relief. I close my eyes and try to pretend I'm standing on the bluff at Cape Vega, or—better yet—my lagoon outside Bircharbor Palace. Then, with trembling legs, I make my way up the dais and next to the hoop. I refuse to look out at the audience as I grasp one side of the lyra with both hands. My muscles ache, but I ignore it. Nadia assured me once I start the routine, my body will loosen up so long as I keep breathing.

Gripping the hoop tight, I lift my feet off the ground. Swinging one leg out wide, I clench my core and raise the leg up, up, and hook it over the ring while the other straightens to a point. Then, keeping one hand on the hoop, I let go with the other and lift it overhead in an arc, bending back a little at a time until I find a long, sinuous pose. I breathe deep here, allowing myself to gather my bearings while I hold the position. The lyra turns in a slow circle, and I feel my nerves begin to settle. With the fluid motions that Nadia taught me, I reverse the arc and return my hand to the ring, higher this time, and pull myself up until both legs are over the bottom of the hoop. From there I perform move after move and find myself enjoying the elegant poses I unlock with the simple shift of grip and limb placement. I try to keep each motion aligned with the music, but I'm sure I'm missing a beat or three. At least I'm remembering my routine. And not just remembering it…I'm performing it really well. As well as I can, that is.

I continue the routine, extending my arms and legs. Hold pose. Shift slow. Change grip. Extend one arm, point a toe, hook my knee around the hoop. Hold pose. Shift again. Again.

My confidence grows as I near the finale, my smile stretching over my lips. Facing forward, I sit in the hoop like a swing with my hands gripping opposite sides. I point my toes, dangle my legs, and secure the hoop beneath my knees. Then, as gracefully as I can, I slide my hands down the

lyra and lower myself backward until my head is just a couple feet above the ground. I extend my arms and arch my back, holding the pose while the ring turns. Thankfully, the turning motion feels so similar to being underwater that it hardly makes me dizzy. I'd be in trouble if it did.

Instead of trouble, I find only ease as I bend forward and grasp the hoop again. My muscles burn a little as I begin to lift my legs off the hoop. I straighten them and bend into an upside-down *L* shape with my legs overhead, my body now beneath the hoop. I maintain the pose for a few seconds and then bend my knees, bringing my feet toward the lyra and underneath it. My arms quiver as I hold my weight, my strength wearing thin. All that's left is to lower my body down and put my feet on the ground. But as I try to lean back and plant my legs, I find myself stuck.

I look at the hoop and find folds of gold chiffon wrapped around the bottom near my hands.

"Shells," I curse. I'll have to find a different way off after I untangle my damn skirt. Breathing deep, I shift my grip, intending to pull myself back up. My shoulders quiver, my biceps scream, my fatigue growing with every second. Then my hands slip from the hoop. I yelp, expecting to feel the ground meet my back, but my skirt is still stuck. Kicking my legs, I reach for the hoop again, only to hear the distinct sound of tearing chiffon.

My skirt rips loose and I scramble to grasp the hoop, to land upright, to do anything but fall on my ass like an idiot. But it's too late.

And yet, to the ground my ass does not fall.

Instead, a pair of hands brace behind me, slowing my momentum. I grip…something, but it certainly isn't the lyra. It takes me a moment to understand where I am…and who stands before me. I'm tilted at an angle mid-fall, my arms slung around Dorian's neck, his hands around my waist. I freeze, not daring to breathe as Dorian's face is mere inches from mine, his brow furrowed with concern. Then his expression softens and a corner of his mouth quirks.

His voice comes low and quiet for only me to hear. "Didn't I already meet you like this earlier this morning?"

My heart pounds so rapidly I'm sure he feels it reverberating through my arms, my torso, through every part of me that touches him. Which is…a lot right now.

It only lasts a moment more. Too soon—or not soon enough—he pulls me to standing and rushes back down the dais, leaving me alone. Jeremy's

piano has gone quiet, and I haven't the slightest notion when he ceased playing. I stare out at the audience, nibbling my lip, and then waves of sound break out before me. At first, all I hear is applause, then I realize half the sound is laughter, bellowing guffaws.

I purse my lips and Sam Sputnik's flash bulb flares. When my eyes clear, I find Glint McCreedy grinning wide as he stands before me, eyes darting from me to his notebook as he furiously scribbles. It takes all my restraint not to glower at them both. My gaze sweeps over the front pew and lands on Dorian. He still wears the same crooked smile I saw a moment ago up close, and it makes him seem so different. So much like the version of him I met this morning. The sweaty, smirking, shirtless version—

Crossing my arms, I avert my gaze and stomp down the dais. Not ladylike, I know, but right now I don't care. I'm too embarrassed for grace right now. Grace can shove its head right up its ass because I clearly don't have any.

I return to my pew, where Greta and Briony flank me. "That was amazing," Briony whispers, her smile wide.

"You sure do know how to stir drama, don't you?" Greta adds.

I ignore them and try not to sulk too hard. Meanwhile, my flesh feels hot where the ghost of Dorian's touch still burns.

24

Another flower stands in a vase on my dressing table alongside the first, the newest being a purple star-shaped dahlia. I was shocked when my name was called as soon as the Blessing Ceremony began, and even more so when I noted the dahlia's color as it was delivered to my shaking hands. Tonight, the flowers belonging to those who would stay were purple. Agnes was the one who received the white. She went home after much sobbing in the hall and consoling by Josie. At that point, I made it my mission to remain firmly in my room so I wouldn't be expected to say goodbye. It's not like I know her well at all.

In the wake of these events, I know I should feel nothing but relief, nothing but pride for lasting one more day and making it that much closer to fulfilling my mission. Instead, I feel restless. Agitated. Tossing and turning in bed. It's nearing midnight and no matter how I try, I can't seem to find sleep. If only Podaxis were still here, then I'd wake him up and have someone to talk to. But he's already gone back to his own quarters instead of staying with me. Independent little bastard. It's good for him, I'm sure, to become less attached to me. Fungus sprites are familial creatures and they thrive off close relationships. For so long, I've been that relationship. But now…

I remember seeing him glow around Nadia this morning, and that strange blend of joy and sorrow fills my chest. My friend is preparing to forge a new bond, one I couldn't be happier about. Still, it creates a sense of longing in my heart. An empty void. A wish that—someday—I might find that too. Someone I'm willing to grow for. To love. To be honest with.

Dorian's face flashes before my mind's eye, that secret smirk playing over his lips. *Didn't I already meet you like this earlier this morning*?

I bolt upright in bed. Why did *he* come to mind when I was pondering about…about…I can't even finish the thought. Dorian Ariko is not someone to swoon over. I don't care how glistening his stupid muscles are or how strong his hands are. He's a fae-killing monster, one I've been sent to put down. I can't…I can't think of him any other way.

But when I remember the way he held me after I fell from the lyra, the way my skin heated beneath his hands, the way my heart raced…

No. None of that. Dorian is a brother of Saint Lazaro, a church that fought against the fae in a bloody rebellion. One he defended when not even his own priest would. He killed a fae when he was just a boy. He's the son of a violent criminal.

I think back to this morning when I found him practicing in the training room. My mind had been wrapped around bare skin and impressive muscles when I really should have seen what was truly before me. He was practicing *fighting*. Boxing. The same sport his father was executed for after forcing captive fae into deadly matches. What was it Nimue said? That it was believed Dorian had been training to fight when he murdered the fae—the one he claimed was killed in self-defense?

That should be evidence enough to see him as a brutal killer. What is wrong with me? Perhaps pretending to try and win his heart is getting to me, making me confused over what's real and what's not.

I shake my head with frustration and shove back the covers, then I stomp over to my wardrobe and put on the first clothes I see. A skirt. A blouse. I wish I'd brought my cap and trousers, but these items will have to do. All I know is I need air. The sound of waves. The peace of Cape Vega.

Once dressed, I open my door to the quiet, empty hall. There are no sounds in the women's wing, no evidence that anyone else but me is afflicted with the irritating inability to find slumber. Then, taking each hall and turn one at a time, I make my way to the courtyard garden. I stand just inside the doorway and glance out at the dark shrubs, flower bushes, and trees, seeking signs of life. My eyes roam the walls, looking for open curtains, lights, and peering eyes. But there's nothing. Only the light of the moon overhead. On silent feet, I creep through the door and across the garden path—then halt.

At the other side of the garden, there's movement. A shadow amongst shadows. I duck down next to a hedge and watch as the figure strolls from one door to another at the far end—my very destination. The figure's stride is quick and smooth. They're dressed not in any of the brotherhood's pristine uniforms but down to simple trousers and shirtsleeves. And when they glance back the way they came, moonlight catches on familiar features. Ones I've seen up close now.

A strong nose. Soft lips. Serious expression.

I frown as Dorian slips through the doorway that leads to the alleyway exit. Suspicion crawls up my spine, sending all intentions of going to Cape Vega away. Now my only thoughts are to follow Dorian, see where he's off to. I know it could be nothing. He could be in need of fresh air like I am. But Dorian is a wanted fugitive. His terms of sanctuary keep him safe within the confines of the church's grounds. Wherever he's going, it's not as a brother of Saint Lazaro, as evidenced by his casual clothing. Whatever he's about to do, it's secret.

Without a second thought, I make my way across the garden and through the same door he just fled. As I reach it, I hear the soft close of the next one—the one that leads to the alley. I step behind it and wait, counting imagined footsteps. Even though the hesitation poses the risk that I could lose him, it gives enough delay that he won't hear the door open again…and see me following.

After several seconds pass, I take a deep breath, and quietly open the door.

The alleyway is empty with no sign of him to the left or right. I nibble my lip, debating which way to go, and settle on the left. It won't be too inconvenient to double back if he isn't there. I stalk down the alley, my heart hammering with something close to excitement. I'm not sure what I expect to find, but part of me is desperate to catch him attempting something vile. If I do, it will prove Nimue's claims about his nature. I could even stop him in the act, deliver my kiss when he's caught unawares, and fulfill my mission without the slightest hesitation. There will be no more fluttering nerves when I look at him. No more stammered words when I try to speak around him. No more heat on my flesh when I remember his touch.

No more second guessing if I'm doing the right thing.

My confidence grows as I reach the mouth of the alley, but then another possibility comes to me. Instead of sneaking out to perform some violent act, he could be…visiting a lover.

The thought sends a wave of fire rising to my cheeks, but I breathe it away. I suppose finding him with a mistress wouldn't exactly prove he deserves to die, but I could use it against him. There are a few contestants who would be livid to discover their desired beau is unchaste. It might even be enough to get them to quit the competition early…

I round the corner and head for Cygnus. The streets are about as busy as they get on Salvation Street after midnight, meaning far less populated than Halley, but vastly more active than the quiet inside the sleeping church. I scan the streets, seeking his retreating form somewhere on the sidewalk, and spot him. He's on the corner across the street, but he isn't retreating, stalking, or skulking about. He's at the Lumies vendor.

I nearly stumble when I see him but force myself to keep walking and cross to the other side of Cygnus. There I pause next to the Church of Horticulture and glance back at the Lumies stand. Dorian accepts a paper bag, hands the vendor payment, and then takes off west down Cygnus. I let him take the lead before I start to follow from the other side of the street, watching as he pops a Lumie into his mouth. I assume that means he enjoyed my gift this morning.

He scarfs down two more Lumies in rapid succession, then disposes of the bag in a garbage bin outside the last church on Cygnus. There he turns the corner and heads north. The streets aren't nearly as busy here, so I follow him at a greater distance to avoid being spotted. However, not once does he look behind him. Hands in his pockets, he strolls at a leisurely pace, seeming far more at ease than he did when he snuck through the garden. Soon the lights on Halley Street beckon just ahead and the sidewalks grow busier again. I quicken my pace to keep him in sight as he turns left on Halley. For a moment, he's swallowed by a crowd of rowdy men hovering outside a tavern, but as I skirt around them, I find him on the other side, strolling away. The west end of Halley stands in stark contrast to the east where I stole my shell comb outside the opera house. Where east of Third hosts elite clientele, high-end theaters, and private clubs, west of First finds more taverns, vapor houses, and gambling dens than anywhere else in Lumenas. Not to mention brothels.

My stomach tightens as I revisit the possibility that Dorian has come here for the pleasures of the flesh.

Finally, his stride breaks, and he halts as if taken by surprise. I pause too and lean against the nearest wall, posture slouched like the drunkards stumbling down the sidewalk around me. Dorian, of course, doesn't bother looking my way. His attention is fixated on the marquee outside the Emerald Comet Arena. He rubs his jaw as he reads the sign, something about Emmet versus Hastings to take place tomorrow evening…

Ah, a boxing match. Of course.

I study his face and find longing in his expression. He stares at the marquee a few seconds more before he takes off again. I follow too, my curiosity growing with every step. Finally, he turns toward a building and strolls right through the door.

I linger outside the establishment, studying the simple black sign above the door. Club Scorpius. I've never heard of such a club, but I catch strains of music coming from inside. Panic laces through me as I reach for the door, debating whether Club Scorpius might be someplace I'd be better off not entering. Despite the music, it could be a pleasure house. Or a private gentlemen's club. Or…

A terrifying thought strikes me. This close to the Emerald Comet Arena, it could be a…a fighting den. An *illegal* fighting den.

Hardening my resolve, I pull open the door and enter Club Scorpius.

25

I pause just inside the door. Club Scorpius is neither a pleasure house nor an illegal boxing ring. I couldn't be more underwhelmed. Not that the establishment is by any means plain, it's just…I didn't expect Dorian to come to a simple music hall. The club looks like little more than something you'd find on Orion Street, with its modest layout, lack of doorman, coatroom, and ushers. There's just a stage, a dance floor, a bar, and a dining area with tables, chairs, and a few curtained booths. The lights are dim, creating a secretive ambiance, and the air is heavy with a pungent concoction of perfume, smoke, and alcohol.

A band plays an upbeat tune from the stage, the ensemble consisting of drums, piano, and three horns I don't know the names of. At the center stands a fae female with short red hair, pointed ears, and a long green dress. She sways side to side, singing to the music in a trilling voice. It's the type of song one only finds at a small music hall like this one, and the kind of music I like best.

Before I came to the city, I never cared much for music or dancing. I was never tempted to remove my sealskin and dance on the shore with my cousins, never felt any desire to learn their sultry moves. Then I came here and discovered there's far more to music and dancing than I ever knew. While I still can't stand opera or those slow, precise dances performed in the many ballrooms throughout Lumenas, I've gained an appreciation for the type of music I find now. And the dancing is exactly the kind I can tolerate. Here the moves are wild and chaotic. Some people dance alone, others with a partner. There are no reservations when it comes to touch,

with some holding hands, others pressing the full length of their bodies against their companion's.

I blush a little at the copious displays of the latter and remind myself why I'm here. Shifting my gaze away from the dance floor, I scan the club for signs of a tall form and dark wavy hair. Finally, I spot him settling onto a barstool. I walk into the dining area but don't know what to do next. I followed him, I found him…and he's ordering a drink. Not visiting his lover. Not seeking pleasure at a seedy brothel. Shells, he certainly isn't betting on illegal fighting matches or beating up fae in alleyways. Maybe trying to dig up dirt on him was a mistake—

"Pearl!"

My heart leaps into my throat as Martin's voice rings out from the far end of the bar. He's leaning casually against the countertop, and when I meet his eyes, he nods with a wide smile. I whirl quickly around and head back the way I came, but before I can take more than three steps, Martin is before me.

"Pearl, hey, how are you?"

I press my lips into a weak grin and force myself not to glance over my shoulder at Dorian. Keeping my voice quiet, I rush to say, "I'm fine, thank you. I was just leaving actually—"

"How's the…you know…the contest going?" There's hesitation in his tone and something like hope. The look in his eyes brings back memories of our time together a few weeks back. Times I never let myself dwell on because I knew it could never be more.

For the first time since I've known him, freedom is within my grasp. Soon I won't have to run anymore. Once I succeed in my mission, I'll be free from my deadly magic. And I'll finally have the chance to experience the one thing I've avoided since I discovered my power.

Love.

As I think it, the word sinks my stomach. At first, I think it's guilt over what I must do. And that's certainly there, a constant companion twisting my heart with every breath I take. But it's also because I know love is not what I feel for Martin. Not even close. I doubt it's what he feels for me either.

For a moment, I don't know what to say to him. Partially because I can't lie and I'm a little too flustered to weave deception right now. But also because what I say now could finally bring closure to our relationship.

He reaches for me and lights a hand on my shoulder. I seize up, fearing he might try to kiss me. The thought alone has the tingling in my lips intensifying. He doesn't seem to notice my icy response and begins rubbing his hand up and down my arm. "I'm not mad, Pearl. I'm…I'm happy for you. If that's really what you want." His words are gentle, but his expression suggests he might not fully mean them. There is something like hurt in his eyes. Or jealousy?

"Thank you for understanding," I say, keeping my tone formal. "I never meant to lead you on or anything, and this competition…" I hazard a glance at the bar, but it's too fleeting to tell whether Dorian is looking or if he's even still there. I take a deep breath and deliver a version of the truth, one that will tell him one thing but mean another to me. "This competition provides me an opportunity to have something I desperately want more than anything in the world."

Martin's hand goes still on my arm and tightens a mere fraction. "Something you want more than anything in the world."

I swallow hard. "Yes."

He releases me with a resigned nod. "All right. I can respect that."

"Thank you. Now, I…I really should go…" The words dry on my lips as I grow aware of a presence beside us. I don't need to look to know it's *him*. I can sense him. Or perhaps it's that familiar salt I smelled on his skin this morning.

"Maisie?" Dorian says. "What are you doing here?"

I do my best to look surprised as I turn to face him. The strange sight of him dressed down to his shirtsleeves is enough to trap the words in my throat while I try to compose myself. "Brother Dorian, what a pleasant—"

"Are you following me?" His expression is hard, eyes narrowed with suspicion. It's such a contrast to the playful smirk I saw on his lips when he caught me under the lyra. The shift is so irritating it sets my teeth on edge, heating my veins with fire.

My mouth falls open with indignation—something that isn't hard for me to feign in this moment. "Are *you* following *me*?"

Martin rounds on Dorian. "Wait, you're following her?"

Dorian and I both ignore him as we hold each other's stare. He opens his mouth but I speak first. "I shouldn't have to be trapped in the church all week. It's cruel."

"Why did you come here?"

“Why did *you* come here?”

“I was here first.”

I cross my arms. “How do you know?” When he doesn’t answer, I add, “Why are you so upset I’m here? Are you afraid you’ll be caught doing something you shouldn’t be?”

“I came for a drink.”

“So did...” I try to say I did too, but it’s too much of a lie for me to believe. Switching my words around, I say, “I’m getting a drink as well. Martin, will you get me one?”

His expression brightens. “Anything in particular—”

“Something strong.”

“You got it,” he says and affectionately squeezes my arm. I clench my jaw to keep from recoiling at his touch.

My eyes remain on Dorian’s, rage boiling my blood. He may be right about me following him, and perhaps I’m just a tad belligerent about getting caught. But mostly I’m aggravated that he has the nerve to act so self-righteous about it.

He takes a step closer. “If you’re trying to get close to me, thinking it will help you win, you’re wrong, temptress.”

If I was angry before, now I’m a vicious sea in a storm. “How dare you insinuate such a thing! I’ve lived in Lumenas for a year, you know. If anyone has a claim on the city’s best establishments, it’s me.”

He scoffs. “This is one of the city’s best establishments?”

“It’s good enough for me. And apparently you too.”

“I’ve been here five days in a row and I’ve never once seen you here.”

“Oh, so now you own the place?”

He rolls his eyes, dark mirth playing over his lips. “I just find it hard to believe that out of all the places you could have gone, you’d come here, to the same place I’ve been going every night to escape—” His words falter.

Was he going to say the church? He couldn’t feel negatively about Saint Lazaro, for his dinnertime talk was that of a zealot. Perhaps he was going to say pageant. I imagine it must be tiresome pretending to *want* a fae bride.

He makes no effort to finish the sentence. “Is Glint McCreedy around here or something? Is Sam Sputnik poised and ready to catch me in some scandalous photograph with the selkie temptress?”

My cheeks have set to blazing now. “Believe what you will, but I didn’t come here to try and spend extra time with you or whatever it is you think

I'm doing. I'm here for my drink and to visit with my friend."

"Friend," he echoes with a laugh. "Sneaking out of the church to visit your male friend at night while you're supposed to be competing for my hand is far worse than if you'd followed me."

I throw my hands in the air. "I don't know what you want from me."

"I don't know what *you* want from *me*. Half the time you act like it's a chore to be in my presence and that you're two seconds away from ripping my head off. The other half you seem too shy to speak to me and yet try to kiss me."

Humiliation writhes like a whirlpool in my chest. I point a finger at him, my voice quavering. "That is not half the time. That was one time and I already apologized. Besides, you're one to talk! Half the time you're a tolerable person, the other half you're cold and distant and treat me like I'm nothing but a conniving fae monster."

He purses his lips but says nothing, leaving icy silence between us. Thankfully, Martin returns with my drink. I take it from him and knock it back at once, barely registering its taste as heat slides down my throat and warms my stomach. Whatever the drink is, it's fae and strong. I can tell by the tingling euphoria that begins dancing at the edges of my awareness.

Martin glances between me and Dorian, then all but shoves Dorian out of the way to stand between us. "Care to dance?"

"Yes," I say without looking at him. Dorian shakes his head and turns back to the bar. I watch his retreating form with a mixture of rage and shame. My source of rage is obvious. Dorian is a self-righteous asshole. But shame…

Shame is found in my own words. The ones I said about him treating me like I'm a conniving fae monster.

The truth is, I don't feel that way because of how he acts around me. I feel that way because I *am* a fae monster. What other kind of person would use fae magic to murder a person?

A desperate one, I remind myself. And there's still no going back. I may not have found Dorian doing something awful tonight, aside from being his usual self, but that doesn't change anything. I must kill or be killed.

Just once.

Just this once.

Then I'll never have to worry about Nimue, or the curse she placed upon me, or her Sisters of the Black Eel ever again.

Martin holds out his arm and nods toward the dance floor. “Shall we?”
“Yes, but first, I need another drink.”

26

As the night wears on, my inhibitions melt away. I drink. I dance. Drink. Dance. All the while casting glances at the bar where Dorian remains alone, throwing back probably twice as many drinks as I've had. I try not to think too much of it whenever I look his way and find his eyes on me. Instead, I avert my gaze and try to look like I'm having more fun than I really am, whether I'm dancing alone or chatting with Martin. Despite my efforts to pretend I'm having the time of my life, I know my actions are jeopardizing all the hard work I did earlier today with Dorian. It will be a miracle if I'm not eliminated at tomorrow night's Blessing Ceremony. But those worries belong to tomorrow. Tonight, I just want to forget.

Forget my conversation with Dorian.

Forget what I must do to him.

Forget what will happen if I don't.

Forget that he deserves what's coming to him.

Forget that part of me isn't certain he does.

After my third glass of Starshine, Star Court's most famous alcoholic beverage, I'm back on the dance floor, swaying to the band's raucous drums, horns, and piano. My head feels light and my limbs feel lighter, like I'm back in the ocean, my motions like flippers cutting through water. I get asked to dance by a few strangers, but I refuse them all, preferring to sway alone. I've only danced once with Martin so far, thank the shells. I'm still determined not to give him the wrong idea about us. With Starshine clouding my mind, I can't tell how long it's been since I last saw him. I'm

starting to wonder if he's left without saying goodbye—something I'd be more than relieved about—when he suddenly stands before me, hand extended. A new song has begun, this one slower than the last. Couples pair up and draw close. "May I have this dance?" he asks.

I open my mouth to say no, but my words are too slow. Or he's too fast. Whatever the case, he takes my hand and steps in close, his other arm snaking around my waist. "Just one more dance?"

"Fine." I take a step back and place a hand on his shoulder to separate us. His arm loosens behind me and takes a more chaste position at the middle of my back. While I may not be the most proper lady, I do want to maintain boundaries with him. Even more so with Dorian watching. The thought has my gaze drifting back to the bar, where Dorian nurses a full glass, his eyes locked on mine. I look back at Martin, who starts to turn us in a rhythmless dance.

He furrows his brow as he looks down at me. "So, that man…he's the one you're competing to marry?"

"Yes," I say, forcing my expression to remain neutral.

"The two of you didn't seem to be on the best terms."

"We've had our…issues."

He grins. "Ah, I see what this is."

"What?"

"The arguing. The anger. That's what makes him so enticing, isn't it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He shrugs. "I've had my share of hate-trysts. There's nothing quite like hate to fan the flames of passion."

I frown. "That's not what it is."

"Still," he says, "you can do better. You don't need to be part of some ridiculous pageant to find a good husband. You could have anyone and not settle for an asshole like him."

Heat burns my chest, words flying to my lips in Dorian's defense, but I swallow them down. Why would I defend Dorian? Martin's right, isn't he? Haven't I called Dorian the same thing in my head?

Memories of Dorian catching me beneath the aerial hoop flood my mind. Then earlier ones of him thanking me for saving his life, accepting my gift of Lumies, buying them again tonight. I admit there's more to Dorian than I know. Probably a lot of terrible things, yes, but other things too. Softer things I've rarely seen hints of.

“He’s not what you think,” I say, surprised when the words leave my mouth.

“I still think you can do better. In fact, I *know*—”

“Whom I love is my business,” I say, taking on a more serious tone.

He narrows his eyes. “You love him then?”

I’m left gaping, at a loss for words. “I…I’m still getting to know him.”

He pulls me hard against him, pressing my chest to his. His breath hits my face, heavy with alcohol. “If it’s passion you need, I can give you that. I’ve kept my distance because you said no kissing and no attachments. Now it’s clear that’s not what you truly want. I can be far more for you than he could.”

I push his chest, forcing space between us again. “I don’t like you like that, Martin,” I say through my teeth.

“And you like him that way? A man you’ve known for only a handful of days?” He stops and brings his hand to my cheek. The smell of his liquor-infused breath invades my senses. I turn my head, evading his touch, but he reaches for the other cheek as well, framing my face.

“Martin, stop.”

“I know you, Pearl. I’ve known you almost an entire year.”

“You don’t know me at all.” I shove both of his hands off my face, but he closes in again. Before his hands make contact, he lurches several feet back. It takes me a moment to realize Dorian stands before him, palm at the center of his chest.

“Get your hands off her,” he says, voice a deep growl.

Martin sneers at Dorian. “Get your hands off *me*.”

“I will if you get away from her.”

“Go home, Martin,” I add, crossing my arms. “You’re drunk and making a fool of yourself.”

He glances between me and Dorian, then finally shrugs out of Dorian’s grip. Glowering, he smooths the front of his shirt and stalks away.

I glare at his back until he’s out of sight.

Dorian slowly turns to face me. “Are you all right?”

I nod. While I don’t feel I was in too much danger from Martin's advances, I’m grateful they ended so abruptly. I’ll have to tell Nadia, Klaus, and Stanley about his behavior. Martin has never acted the way he did tonight, but my friends should be warned about his true nature.

Dorian studies me with a furrowed brow. After a few silent moments, he asks, “May I have the rest of this dance?”

My heart does a flip in my chest. “All right.”

Dorian takes a few cautious steps closer—nothing like Martin’s invasive attempts at closeness. Regardless, I’m forced to suppress a gasp as his hand comes behind my back. Not out of fear, but at how his hand warms my skin instantly. It’s then I realize neither of us are wearing gloves. He lifts his other hand and I place mine over his. We start to sway, eyes averted over each other’s shoulders as we move to the slow beat. We continue like that for several minutes. I’m so aware of him, of the feel of his hands in contrast to the many inches that separate the rest of our bodies. I don’t even notice when the song ends and a new one begins, slightly faster than the last. I only notice when he takes both my hands and guides us into a new rhythm, one that has us stepping together and apart, together and apart.

His countenance slowly shifts from his signature serious expression to something more boyish, easy. Lightheaded euphoria thrums through me, courtesy of the Starshine still swimming in my veins, and soon a smile tugs my lips. With my eyes still anywhere but his, I allow myself to pretend I’m not dancing with Dorian Ariko, just…someone. A boy. And for a moment, we’re not at the place I caught him sneaking off to after I followed him. Just a music hall. A dance. An evening of fun and freedom.

Dorian dances like he’s done this before, which surprises me. From how uptight he acts most of the time, I would have pegged him for someone who would only feel comfortable at a stuffy ball, not moving light on his feet to a jazz band. When we next step apart, he releases one of my hands and turns me with the other, spinning me in a circle. Then he brings me back to him. Without realizing it, I step fully into his arms, my arm around his neck and his palm low on my back. Our other hands remain more chastely clasped at the side, but this time, we’re so close it makes my breath hitch. A mere inch stands between us, and I can feel his breath stirring my hair. I sense his eyes burning into me and I force myself to look up and meet them.

There’s a ponderous expression on his face as he holds my gaze, and I feel like there’s a question written in the crease between his brows. “What?” I say, my voice coming out breathy.

“Who is Martin to you?”

Just like that, my fantasy about dancing with just *someone* evaporates. Because someone else wouldn’t ask such a thing without more delicacy.

“He’s a friend,” I say curtly. “He *was* a friend. He spends time with the other resident performers at the Vulture’s Prose.”

“Just a friend?

I know I shouldn’t elaborate on my history with Martin, but Starshine seems to be loosening my tongue. Or perhaps it’s gratitude for Dorian’s intervention. “He’s a former lover, but I never liked him the way he wanted me to. He’s not my type. And now I don’t like him at all.”

Amusement flickers in his eyes. “Not your type? What is your type then?”

He probably expects me to flatter him, and I should. If I were smarter, I’d take this opportunity to get back on his good side, to convince him I’m competing for his hand with my whole heart. I look away from him and answer only with a shrug.

“Come on,” he says, his serious façade crumbling more and more around him, revealing another layer of an easy manner I never knew existed. “Tell me. Think of this as one of our rendezvous for the competition. If you were wily enough to steal an extra date with me, you might as well take advantage of it.”

My mouth falls open as I return my gaze to his, indignation rolling through my core…only to find that crooked smile of his playing over his lips.

Holy shells. Did he just…playfully tease me?

It’s enough to lower my defenses as well, so much so that I find myself speaking the truth. “I like men with a little extra blubber.”

He laughs. “Blubber?”

“Why is that funny? I’ll have you know I find blubber very attractive. I was praised for being a particularly rotund seal pup, and I’m proud of that.”

His grin grows wider. “I’ve just never heard someone use that term before. Since you’re a selkie temptress, it makes sense you’d use the word blubber. And that you’d find it so cute.”

“Oh,” I say, ignoring his use of the word *temptress*. For the first time, it doesn’t sound like an insult coming from his lips. “I forget blubber is more of a sea fae asset.”

“What else do you find attractive?”

“Humor. Kindness.” The next word comes unbidden. “Muscles. I…I find muscles very attractive too.” Damn it, why did I just say that? Stupid Starshine.

He quirks a brow. “Is that so?”

My cheeks burn, and I quickly seek to shift our conversation anywhere but around muscles. “What do you like in a mate?”

He opens his mouth but stops himself. Slowly, the mirth fades from his eyes and his expression turns stony again. He clears his throat. “I seek a bride with goodness, chastity, and a deep reverence for the Almighty, someone who will want to stand at my side as a demonstration of His greatness.”

I frown. The line sounds cold and rehearsed. I nibble my lip, certain I shouldn’t say anything. And yet…that damn Starshine urges my mouth to move before I can stop myself.

“Is that really what you like in a mate, or is that what you want said in the broadsheets?”

He narrows his eyes, and I fear I should have swallowed my words after all. Then his composure loosens and he releases a heavy sigh. His playful smile returns. “We are pretending to be on an official date, aren’t we?”

“You said it, not me. And I certainly wasn’t planning to go on record about how much I love blubber and muscles, so your answer should be candid as well.”

He releases my waist and turns me in another circle before bringing me right back into his arms. This time, my chest brushes his, sending a roiling heat low in my belly. “I want a woman who is…honest.”

That’s not me. Not when it comes to him, at least.

“One who isn’t afraid to speak her mind.”

Okay, that might actually be true of me.

“Someone who makes me feel like I’m more than my uniform or my fortune. Someone who won’t judge me for my past.” He holds my gaze for a few seconds, and his expression grows distant. I can only imagine mentioning his past conjured thoughts of his father. And his own crimes.

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep my sympathy at bay, but my heart sinks just the same. He *is* being judged for his past. Not just by me but by the entire Alpha Council. Shouldn’t he be, though? It’s up to the fae to keep the isle safe, to ensure we don’t invite danger through our protective barrier. For if we do, we could summon threats we haven’t seen since the Church of Saint Lazaro sparked their bloody rebellion.

Dorian shakes his head and grins again. “I like someone who’s a good dancer.”

I laugh as he spins me. “I fail on that count. You and I both know I lack grace.”

“No, you don’t,” he says as he pulls me in close again.

I give him a pointed look. “I nearly fell twice in front of you.”

“That doesn’t mean you lack grace. I was watching you dance.” His eyes crinkle at the corners as his smile grows. It’s an expression I’ve never seen before.

“You…watched me dance?”

He nods. “From the bar. You move so freely. I…I like it. I like—”

The breath catches in my throat as his gaze roams over me, his eyes glazed. I stiffen as I feel the hand at my lower back begin to rise, his fingers splayed out, sending shivers up my spine. His other hand releases mine and trails up my arm to my shoulder. My stomach flips and an increased tingle surges through my lips. With a sudden shock, I realize this might be the moment he kisses me. My heart hammers against my ribs as he lifts his hand from my shoulder to my hair. I hold my breath, fighting the urge to pull away, turn my face, do anything but stay still and let him do what must be done. The instinct to fight necessity is senseless. I know it is. I *must* let this happen.

I close my eyes and wait.

But nothing happens.

My eyes fly open, and I realize we’ve stopped dancing. Other dancers continue to move around us, and at some point, the song must have changed again, because the tune is now riotous, matching the pounding of my heart. Dorian remains in place, hand on my hair, eyes swimming as they flit over me.

“Moonlight,” he says, the word coming out slow and soft. “The stars dancing around your head remind me of the moonlight I saw in your hair the night you rescued me.”

“Stars?” I glance up, expecting to find the glare of the stage lights or even fire sprites, but there’s nothing.

“Seven hells, you’re beautiful. Where did you get those stars?”

That’s when I realize something I should have known the minute he started being nice to me.

Dorian Ariko is positively inebriated.

27

I take a step back from Dorian, a tide of panic rising inside me. “How much have you had to drink tonight?”

His eyelids fall in a slow blink. “Not enough.”

“What did you drink?”

“The same thing I always get. Three mugs of ale and a Honey Badger.”

I let out a relieved sigh. Ale is very much a human libation, but anything fae-made could pose risks. While fae can imbibe in almost anything and experience nothing more than fleeting pleasure or a temporary alteration of mood, humans can experience disastrous consequences if they consume certain varieties of fae fruit. Especially for those who haven’t built up a tolerance. Considering Dorian lived in Bretton up until just over a week ago, he can’t be used to such elixirs yet. Luckily, it was just ale. Unless—

“What the shells is a Honey Badger?”

“Ale with a shot of Honey Pyrus.”

I roll my eyes. Well, that explains the hallucinations. Thankfully, it was only a shot, which means its effects should wear off soon.

“I had two of those this time,” he says, cheeks dimpled as his smirk returns. Then he waves his hand in a clumsy gesture. “But before that last one, I had one of…whatever you sent over for me.”

“Wait, what? I never sent anything over to you.”

“Your *friend* did.” He says it with exaggerated scorn. “Right before he went to dance with you. Before I wanted to…to rip his head off.” His words are starting to slur together.

“Are you saying Martin gave you a drink and said it was from me?”

He nods.

"What did the drink look like?"

"It was…whatever you were drinking." He tries to shrug, but the move makes him stumble slightly.

His answer has my eyes bulging. "He gave you Starshine? You drank Starshine with Honey Pyrus?" Everyone knows not to mix those two, no matter how small their doses. I clench my jaw, wishing Martin hadn't left so I could punch him in the nose.

"It was…really good. I liked it."

I shake my head, feeling my own inebriation beginning to clear. "We need to get you back to the church. Starshine amplifies the effects of Honey Pyrus, which means your hallucinations are only about to get worse." I'm taken aback by my words as soon as they leave my lips. Why should I care about getting him home before his condition worsens? Isn't this the perfect opportunity? An inebriated man should make for an easy target. If we danced maybe a song or two more, I wouldn't need to wait for him to kiss me. I could kiss him and he'd have no idea it was even happening.

It's a public place, I reason. *Too many witnesses have seen us together. If something happens to him, I could be investigated*. It's a weak excuse, I know, especially when fae intoxicants are involved. There's very little chance my kiss would be linked to his death. Truth be told, this is probably the least suspicious way to deliver it.

"Hallucinations." He chuckles. "Is that why you have stars in your hair? What about the ones in your eyes?"

"That's annoyance," I say. Without a second thought, I turn him away from the dance floor.

He follows a few steps before stopping. "I want to see the stars."

I roll my eyes. "They're in my hair, aren't they?"

"No. Real ones."

"All right," I say, gentling my tone as if I'm speaking to a child. "Follow me outside and we'll look at the real stars."

This time he lets me lead him all the way out of the club. The streets are dark and quiet, with only distant noise coming from central Halley Street where theatrics are still in full swing. We pause in front of the club, and Dorian tips his head back and closes his eyes. When he opens them, he takes in the sky above, releasing a heavy sigh. The stars are faint, with so much light from downtown obscuring their glow, but they're there.

“This is what I do,” he whispers, a small, sad smile tugging his lips. “I come here to forget. Then I look up there so I can pretend I’m somewhere else.”

“Someplace specific?” I ask.

He nods, and his next word comes out wistful. “Home.”

I assume he means the home he grew up in, where fae were kept chained in the cellar. Where Dorian stabbed a sea fae seven times and bathed in her blood. The thought sours my stomach.

For a split second I consider delivering my kiss right now, getting this all over with, doing what I came here to do—but then Dorian slides his gaze to me, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Normally I climb on the church’s roof.”

“We’re not climbing on the roof, but we do need to get you back to the church at once. The only cure for a bad blend of Honey Pyrus and Starshine is sleep. Otherwise…well, you don’t even want to know.” I’ve seen such effects firsthand when Klaus and Stanley decided to see what the fuss was all about. After about two hours, Stanley had emptied the contents of his stomach, ran around the theater to evade invisible spiders, and bawled for his mom. Meanwhile, Klaus went to bed and woke the next day with nothing more than reports of very odd dreams.

“Fine,” he says with a groan and starts off down the sidewalk.

“Not that way.” I grab for his arm and tug his sleeve in the opposite direction. “The church is this way.” He looks down at my hand, and I quickly pull it away before I start walking. I glance back at him to make sure he’s following, only to find him far closer than I expected.

And then he slips his hand into mine.

I nearly trip over my feet but force myself to keep walking, his palm warm against my own. I should pull away. Holding hands like this isn’t proper, especially without gloves. I may not know a lot about being a fancy lady or even a princess, but I know the accepted way to walk with a man is to place your hand loosely at the crook of his elbow. I see couples walk like that throughout the city all the time.

But this? Palms touching, shoulders brushing…

It just isn’t done.

I know all this, but I allow him to continue holding my hand. My excuse is that it will keep him from wandering off to chase invisible monsters and floating stars, but part of me likes the feeling of being this close to a person.

Never mind that person is Dorian Ariko, wanted fugitive, man I've been sent to kill.

We walk in silence, with Dorian exclaiming now and then about bright colors, swirling doorways, all manner of things I can't see. Each time he tries to wander off, I squeeze his hand and ask him to stay with me.

We're just a few blocks from the church when the effects of the intoxicants reach a new level. He stops, turns me to face him, and spins me in a circle like he did on the dance floor. Just like he did then, he finishes the twirl by pulling me in close. I gasp as my chest collides with his. Not knowing what to do with my hands, I place them at his shoulders while his wrap around my back.

"I liked dancing with you tonight," he whispers.

I angle my head to meet his eyes, finding them still glazed and crinkled at the corners. Still very much unlike the serious version of him.

When I say nothing, he adds, "Did you?"

"I did." Shock washes over me as I realize my answer must hold truth. I must still have Starshine influencing my loose tongue.

"We should do it again." His gaze is intent on mine, and I think I see desire swimming in his eyes. Not real desire, of course, but the product of hallucination. At this point, he probably doesn't even remember who I am.

Which means this would be the perfect moment to kiss him…

His smile slips, and his expression turns somber, much like it did when he looked at the stars. "I haven't let myself have fun in a really long time."

I frown, not quite sure what to say in reply. Finally, I settle on, "Why not?"

He shakes his head, eyes distant. "I don't deserve to have fun, yet I go out every night, jeopardizing the chance I have to make things right. Not for me. Nothing can be right for me. But for *them*."

My brows knit together. I'm surprised by his grave countenance. That's not normally an effect of either Honey Pyrus or Starshine. I find myself desperate to understand what he's saying. "What are you talking about?"

His lips curl in a weak smile. "My sisters. I'm all they have left since she…"

I hold my breath, waiting for him to finish, but he doesn't. My question flies off my tongue before I can stop myself. "Who is *she*?"

He meets my eyes. "Mother. She died a few months back."

Without another word, he turns away and continues walking.

~

He's unsteady on his feet when we reach the church. I guide us to the alleyway door, closing it as quietly as I can behind us. "You need to get back to your room," I whisper.

He nods, but the motion seems to jar him. With a wince, he careens to the side. I brace my hands against his ribs to steady him. "Why is the room spinning?" he asks, voice too loud for the dead quiet of the hall.

"Keep your voice down," I say in a furious whisper. "Unless the brotherhood finds it totally acceptable for you to come home inebriated. If that's the case, I'm done helping you for the night."

That seems to sober him a little, and his eyes flash with panic. "No, do not let them find me."

"Then get back to your room and be quiet about it."

"All right," he says and takes a faltering step. Once again, I try to catch him before he slams into the wall. "What's happening? My mind feels clear but my body…this hasn't happened before."

I highly doubt his mind feels clear at all, and soon he'll fall under the illusion of innumerable horrors if he doesn't get to sleep. "Fine, I'll help you. You have to lead the way, though."

"I don't need help. I'm of the Order of Strength." His words end in a chuckle, and he allows me to prop my arm around his waist, the other on his chest. I ignore how intimate this kind of touch would be in any other situation.

Our progress is slow as he takes heavy, shuffling steps, leading us into the garden and through the door I saw him come out of just hours ago. On the other side is a hallway I've never seen before. It's dark and dim and lined with doors. "Initiates' quarters," he whispers.

We pass the doors and make our way to the end of the corridor that ends in—I gulp—stairs. There's no way Dorian can make it down a set of stairs in his condition. "Your room is down there?"

He nods.

Shells. This isn't going to be easy.

Then again, there is one way…

I bite my lip, considering my options. I've only ever carried Podaxis with me through the Twelfth Court, but there's no reason to believe I can't

usher Dorian through it as well. It might be the only way to get him safely back to his room.

But why do I care about getting him to his room? I could disappear right now, make my way through the Twelfth Court and back to the women's wing alone, and let Dorian fall down the stairs to his death.

My heart twists at the thought, an almost tangible pain piercing it. I try to tell myself it's because Dorian must die by my kiss, if only to fulfill my bargain and rid me of my deadly magic, but I know that's not it.

The truth is…

The truth…

I shake my head. It's because I'm not fully in my right mind. I may not be riding the high of Honey Pyrus mixed with Starshine but I did imbibe in my share of drink, and—yes, I admit it—I've put myself in the position to fall for Dorian's stupid nonexistent charms that only appear because he's a drunk idiot. I feel bad for him. That's all. I don't know why, but I do. And while I may be a killer, I can still retain an ounce of dignity for both myself and him. I'm not going to let the fool break his neck at the bottom of the stairs. When he breathes his last breath, it will be on the other side of my lips.

"Hold tight to me," I say to Dorian. Then I close my eyes and disappear.

28

I wake up on my side with a comforting warmth at my back, the smell of salt filling my senses, mingling with a clean aroma like morning dew.

Nestling my face into soft sheets, I realize the smell is coming from my blankets. But my blankets have never smelled this good.

Something shifts behind me, and my first thought is of Podaxis. Then I remember he spent the night in his own quarters. And the form behind me is far too big to be Podaxis. It presses against everything from my back down to my legs. Movement glides over my hip, and I realize it's a hand. A very large, very heavy, warm hand. Hot breath tingles the back of my neck, stirring my hair, and—*who the shells is in my bed*?

My eyes fly open, and I find I'm not in my room at all, but one twice as large as mine. It's about as plain and modestly furnished, but the wardrobe isn't my wardrobe, and its open door reveals nothing but black suits with gold embroidered cuffs. The nightstand isn't my nightstand, nor is the portrait resting upon it, one of a woman and two adolescent girls.

And this bed, with its salt-and-morning-dew scent isn't mine, but—

Like a rushing waterfall, everything comes back to me.

Spying on Dorian as he left the church.

Following him to Club Scorpius.

Downing drink after drink of Starshine.

Dancing with Martin. Then our brief altercation.

Then Dorian.

Dorian.

Dorian.

With the slowest motions I can manage, I turn my head until dark curls come into view, then his bronze forehead, black lashes dusting his cheeks, then down to full lips parted slightly in slumber.

My heart skitters, and I blink a few times to be sure I'm truly seeing what I'm seeing. My gaze leaves his lips to his neck, expecting to see only bare skin, but instead, I find him in his linen shirt. The collar is unbuttoned far too low, but at least he's dressed.

I close my eyes and try to remember what happened after we danced.

We left the club.

Walked home. He held my hand.

I swallow hard at that.

Then we came back here, and I helped him to the stairs—

The Twelfth Court! That's what happened next. I replay the memory in my mind's eye, of me dragging Dorian through glittering purple particles. He remained unconscious the entire time, but it didn't make pulling his weight any easier. Not that he was as heavy as he is outside of the magical realm, but still. Podaxis is like nothing when I carry him in the Twelfth Court. Dorian was a vibrating mass far bigger than me, and I kept struggling to grip him without my hands-that-aren't-hands simply slipping through the particles of his body.

I was spent when we reached the floor, and we collapsed in a heap. Dorian, of course, had no clue what transpired and apologized profusely. It took all my willpower not to retch after expending so much energy in the Twelfth Court, but when we heard a door open at the far end of the hall, we quickly sprang into action, with Dorian dragging me into his room.

I scan the room again, and my eyes find the door. I remember how we stumbled through it last night, shutting it behind us as quickly and as quietly as we could. After that, we held still, Dorian's arm braced against the door, me slumped against the wall, as we listened for sounds of whoever came out to investigate. Thankfully, no one approached his door, and after a few minutes, I became painfully aware of how close we stood.

Dorian moves behind me again, letting out a sleepy sigh. I freeze, debating how the shells to get out of here without waking him. How did I get into his bed in the first place?

I close my eyes and replay the moment Dorian pushed off from the door and began kicking off his shoes, his movements clumsy. That's when I tried to slip out so I could get back to my room, but my legs were still weak from

the Twelfth Court, and they gave out beneath me. I sank to the floor and closed my eyes, catching my breath, and when I next dared open them, I found Dorian in front of me, hand extended.

I remember him helping me stand, but then it was his turn to lose his footing. My head spun and the next thing I knew, we'd tumbled in a tangled heap at the foot of his bed. Laughing like it wasn't the most inappropriate thing in the world, he extricated himself from me and pulled himself to the head of his bed.

I pushed myself upright, but my head continued to spin.

Then came Dorian's whisper. "You can lie down for a bit."

"That's not…" My tongue was too heavy to speak. I tried again. "That's neither chaste nor appropriate."

"Fuck chaste and appropriate," he said then, laughing. I remember laughing too at the sound of profanity on his tongue. What would his brotherhood think of such language? Then he patted the bed and scooted to the far end. "Come. You'll feel better."

"I was supposed to make sure you felt better," I said, but couldn't find it in me to argue more. The prospect of lying down and stopping my head from spinning was too tempting.

That's when I settled onto the bed next to him, several inches separating us. I don't remember much after that. Maybe it was just silence.

But I do recall the last things he said to me.

His voice was barely above a whisper, each word coming out slow and heavy. "If we were at my old university and this was my dormitory. If I weren't a brother of Saint Lazaro and you weren't a princess…"

"Then what?" I remember asking, my body feeling heavy, lulled by the vibrations of his deep voice.

"Then I never would have pushed you away when you tried to kiss me. I would pull you close and let you kiss me now. I'd let you do more. And I'd do more to you."

My breath caught then, but I was too tired to think much of it. "What would you do?"

The next word—the last word—came out like a soft lapping of a wave on a welcoming shore, so smooth and quiet while suggesting hidden depths just beyond it. "Everything."

That's the last thing I recall, and the word echoes through my head. A buzzing heat burns deep in my core, thrilling low in my abdomen. I know I

should get up now before he wakes, but I'm not sure my legs would hold me. I'm too shaken, too wrapped up in that last little word.

Dorian moves again, his hips shifting behind mine, pressing closer. His hand begins to slide from my hip to my stomach, beneath the bottom of my shirt. I realize my blouse has come untucked from my skirt. I'd left my room in such haste before following Dorian last night that I simply tossed my blouse over my chemise…which means that's all that separates his hand from my flesh. It moves higher, higher, each move slow and heavy, made from the depths of sleep, creeping just beneath the curve of one of my breasts. His hand pauses there, and I feel his face come just behind my neck, lips so close to my ear that when he releases the next tired groan, the sound sends a shiver from my spine all the way down to my toes. Warmth burns between my thighs, so I squeeze them tight, ignoring the sound of Dorian's breaths, hard and heavy against my neck—

And then they stop.

Dorian stiffens behind me, the hand beneath my breast tensing.

I curse myself for missing my chance to leave earlier. What's wrong with me? I should have fled the moment I opened my eyes and found myself in unfamiliar quarters. And now I have to deal with…whatever comes next.

Dorian sits upright and bolts off the bed. I do the same, feigning the same shock I see in his eyes. "Why the seven hells are you in my bed?" he asks, chest heaving.

I hold out my hands. "I didn't mean to stay here."

He blinks at me a few times. It's obvious when realization dawns, bringing memories of last night, for that's when he hangs his head and pinches the bridge of his nose, cheeks blazing. "What the hell, temptress?" he mutters.

I take the chance to back toward his door. "I'm going now."

He lifts his head and pins me with a glare. "What are you going to do?" His eyes turn hard, his tone laced with suspicion. "Did you…did you orchestrate this? Is this your way of forcing my hand and winning the contest? By tricking me into sullying your virtue so that I'm honor-bound to marry you?"

"You didn't spoil my virtue—"

"Your reputation then."

I give him a pointed look, fury boiling my blood. My words come through clenched teeth. “I’ll have no reputation to ruin because no one is going to find out, you clam-blasted son-of-a-harpy!”

“Clam-blasted,” he echoes under his breath, expression perplexed.

“Turn around and close your eyes,” I hiss, voice quavering with restraint.

“Why?”

“That way if anyone asks if you saw me leave your room you can say no.”

“Who is going to ask that, and why would it matter if they did? I’m not fae. I can lie.”

I need him to close his eyes because I have no intention of using the actual door to leave. It must be morning by now, which means the brotherhood is likely already bustling about the church. I’ll have to rely on another trip through the Twelfth Court to get out of here unnoticed. I stammer to find an excuse. “What if there’s a hole in my skirt and…and I’m not wearing undergarments?”

His eyes go wide, and he takes a step back. “Where are your undergarments?”

“Just turn around!” I all but yell.

Finally, he does as told and I open and close his door just so he hears the sound. Then I slip silently into a realm of violet.

29

Two hours later, Podaxis shuffles back and forth across my bedroom floor, voice rich with panic. “This isn’t good, Maisie.”

I sit on the bed, brow furrowed as I stare at the full-page spread inside the Daily Illuminator, a paper Podaxis claims is the city’s most popular source for gossip. There I find an article by Glint McCreedy detailing Dorian’s bridal contest. On one side, I see a portrait of Dorian—the same that graces the sign outside the church—while the other side features a few select portraits of some of the contestants. Vanessa is at the top, followed by Greta Garter, then finally…me. Not just me. Me being held up by Dorian at the finale of my disastrous display at the Demonstration of Feminine Accomplishment. If I weren’t so mortified, I’d be impressed by Star Court’s technology for featuring photographs taken less than twenty-four hours ago.

With a grimace, I scan the heading above the photograph. *Selkie Sea Princess or Conniving Drama Queen?* I can’t bear to read what it says in the block of text that accompanies it. With a groan, I fold the paper and toss it to the side, then fall back on my bed. “At least I made it into the papers,” I mutter. “That must count for something, right? They didn’t even bother reporting on Briony or Josie.”

“It only casts you in a negative light,” Podaxis says. He climbs onto the bed and clacks his pincers together. “That’s not all. With your name in the papers, your father will soon hear about this.”

At first, the thought fills my heart with hope and the most childish trust that he’ll soon sweep into the city, take me away, and make everything

right.

But he can't.

He can do nothing.

His bargain with my mother means I'm hers now. I'm a subject of the unseelie Sea Court, not the seelie. And if Nimue is to be believed, he has no power great enough to break the curse she placed upon me, even if he had a right to reclaim me.

"Additionally," Podaxis says, "I feel it is my duty to relay something I overheard."

I roll toward my friend and prop myself onto my elbow. "What?"

"This morning, Dorian asked Father Viktor to reschedule his meeting with you for last. Before your—ahem—*excursion* last night, your date with him was slated as first this morning."

Podaxis knows about my so-called excursion, but only in the barest details. I didn't dare tell him that I accidentally spent the night in his room, in his bed, in his arms—

I shake my head and shift my attention to the sheet of paper lying next to my breakfast plate, upon which the time for today's rendezvous is scheduled. It's at seven this evening with the Blessing Ceremony occurring at eight. He isn't giving me a moment to breathe before moving from one thing to the other. Does that mean he intends for our date to be cut short? Perhaps just a farewell and advance warning that he'll be eliminating me tonight?

"I also heard Father Viktor say he finds you to be a little too rough around the edges to be the wife of a brother of Saint Lazaro. That you aren't submissive enough and he doesn't think your fae soul can be saved. You appear to be the least popular contestant when it comes to the opinion of the church. Vanessa, of course, is the church's favorite, while Greta is the darling of the people."

I sit upright, burning with indignation. "Father Viktor said my *fae soul can't be saved*? How is he supposed to be a modern priest if he's still spouting female submission and fae salvation?"

He shrugs his claws. "He said he really likes you, at least."

I freeze as my pulse kicks up. "Dorian said that?"

"No, Father Viktor. He says you're a sweet, clever girl."

"I don't know if anyone has ever called me sweet," I say, trying to ignore how my heart sinks.

Podaxis sighs. “Maisie, this is only getting worse. Last night was your perfect chance. You should have—”

“I know.”

He hesitates before asking, “Then why didn’t you?”

I stand and fold my arms over my chest, turning my back to him. “It’s not that easy, all right? I thought it would be, but it’s not.”

Podaxis crawls down the bed and circles around until he’s before me. His tone softens. “I know, it isn’t. Killing someone shouldn’t be easy. If it was, you would have joined the Sisters of the Black Eel without ever going on the run. But you’ll die if you don’t.”

“I’m well aware,” I say under my breath.

“Are you? Because time is running out and you don’t have any to spare should you ever get another chance like you had last night. While murder is an unsavory business, you must remember his assassination was sanctioned by the Alpha Council. By your father—”

“What if they’re wrong?” The words fly off my tongue faster than I can comprehend them. But now that I’ve uttered them, I might as well acknowledge their truth. Memories from last night come to me, of Dorian’s sad smile and his confession about the death of his mother. “What if the Alpha Council is wrong about him?”

“He killed a fae. He confessed.”

“Even Nimue admitted it was ruled as self-defense.”

“Let’s say that’s true. Then what, Maisie? What are you going to do about it? Take this issue up with the Alpha Council in the next three days before your curse kills you? Or are you planning to sacrifice yourself?”

His words sober me in a way that has my stomach plummeting to my feet. There’s nothing I can say to argue because he’s right.

He continues, claws clacking across the floor as he paces before me. “I never imagined there’d be an instance where I would encourage killing someone. And if this were any other situation, I would tell you to do whatever it took to keep from hurting anyone. But in this case, your life is payment if you fail your bargain. I can’t…I can’t handle the thought of you dying. You’re my sister, Maisie, in every way but blood. If you die all because of some fugitive’s botched assassination, I think a part of me will die too.”

My heart breaks at that, my throat feeling suddenly raw. I recall finding him in the dressing room with Nadia, seeing him in love, and gaining

further motivation to succeed. I can't break his heart by letting myself be taken by my curse. Besides, if I don't do what must be done, there's no guarantee someone else won't come and finish the job before Dorian marries. Nimue has other assassins, ones far more capable than I am. The only reason she chose me for this mission is because she wanted to punish me.

I take a deep breath, my shoulders slumping. "You're right, Podaxis. It's my fault I got into this mess, but there's nothing else I can do now that I'm in it. I either kill him or I die. And once I succeed, I'll never have to kill anyone again. My curse will be broken. My dark magic will be gone. I'll be free."

I expect the word *free* to excite me like it normally does, but it doesn't. This time, there's a question attached to it.

Will I ever know true freedom if I go through with such a dark deed?

Unwittingly killing Luther was one thing. I hadn't meant to do it.

But this.

With Dorian.

It will be murder.

Sanctioned by the Alpha Council or not, his death will be on my hands forever.

Nausea churns in my stomach and my legs begin to tremble. I slouch on my bed just to keep from falling over. "I hate this so much," I whisper, blinking back unshed tears.

Podaxis taps my ankle in a comforting gesture. "I know, Maisie. I know. But you're so close. If you can get him alone one more time in a situation like you were in last night, he's sure to kiss you. It's clear, at the very least, that he's attracted to you."

I despise the way my chest warms at those words. With a sniffle, I shake away all the thoughts that make me weak and rise to my feet. Like it or not, it's time to formulate a plan. I bring my thumbnail between my teeth and pace the length of my room. As much as it makes my heart clench to consider it, I know Podaxis is right about Dorian being attracted to me. When he's inebriated, at the very least. It was enough to get him to dance with me, and even though his confession about how he liked dancing together was spurred on by his hallucinatory state, there had to have been some truth. Right? During his playful mood last night, he was somber too. He shared things with me that seemed like truths.

Like about his mother.

His sisters who depend on him—

No. Not that. I can't think of that.

Instead, I'll think of the way he pulled me close when he danced. How he held my hand. There must be a way to use whatever meager attraction he might have for me against him.

If I had just one night to truly awe him, impress him, seduce him—

I whirl toward Podaxis. "I have an idea."

AT SEVEN THAT EVENING, I GO TO MEET DORIAN FOR OUR SCHEDULED DATE, this time in the church's library, a room I've never been to. Initiate Jeremy leads me and Podaxis—once again acting as my chaperone—to a pair of doors at the end of a hall. Jeremy opens them and ushers us inside before closing them behind us. The library is hardly worthy of its name, more like a small dusty room that smells of stale paper. There are four rows of bookshelves that appear to be full of nothing but religious texts on one side of the room, and a sitting area on the other. That's where I find Dorian, standing before a chair with his hands behind his back. I meet his gaze and find nothing in his expression. He's back to wearing that cold, emotionless mask, one reflected in his tense posture and the upward tilt of his chin.

Even so, I can't look at him without immediately thinking of how we awoke this morning. His body pressed behind mine. His breath caressing the back of my neck. His hand skating up my stomach…

My breath hitches, but I do my best to compose myself while Podaxis scuttles over to the books. With a deep breath, I head for Dorian.

"Your Highness," he says in a painfully formal tone, "how nice to see you this evening. Glint McCreedy will be in shortly—"

"No," I say as I stride up to him with my head held high. "We're not doing this. I want to reschedule."

Surprise shatters his stoic features. He pulls his head back. "Excuse me?"

"I want to reschedule our date for after tonight's Blessing Ceremony."

He scoffs. "How do you know you won't be going home after the ceremony?"

“Because you will very badly want to attend tonight’s rendezvous.”

“I doubt that.”

With a smirk, I reach into my skirt pocket and extract two tickets. I hold them before his face.

His eyes widen as he reads the titles. “Emmet versus Hastings. You have tickets to tonight’s match?” He tries to grab one, but I pull them away and tuck them back in my pocket.

“I do, and the match is now sold out. If you want to go, you’ll go with me.” It was a gamble to assume he isn’t already going. Based on the music hall he chose to frequent last night, I’m willing to bet he’s partial to less populated haunts. A smart move for someone sneaking away from the safety of his sanctuary.

He eyes me through slitted lids. “Are you bribing me into not sending you home tonight?”

I take a step closer and let fury shine in my eyes. “No, I’m giving you a chance to make it up to me for how you treated me this morning. I didn’t have to help you last night, you know. You would have fallen down the stairs and broken your neck if it weren’t for me.”

His expression softens for a fraction of a second before turning back to suspicion. “I’m supposed to make it up to you by accompanying you to a boxing match? Do you even like boxing?”

I give a flippant shrug. “I heard it’s a very important match. You might also recall what I told you about liking muscles.” My lips pull into a grin as I flutter my lashes. It’s then I realize—with awe and terror—that I’m flirting. *Flirting*. I didn’t know I could do that.

He tucks a corner of his lip between his teeth, and I can tell he’s considering my offer. His shoulders drop, some of the tenseness leaving his posture, but his next words are tangled with regret. “I’m not supposed to leave the church.”

I lower my voice. “That hasn’t stopped you before. You said you’ve gone to Club Scorpius five nights in a row. The match is at midnight. You’ll be able to sneak out.”

He looks to the side, eyes unfocused, then begins to tap his foot. “I can’t be seen. You, more than anyone, should know why.”

“No one will recognize you,” I whisper. “Wear casual clothes like you did last night. Don a hat.”

He chews his lip again, eyes locked on my pocket. Then he releases a resigned groan. “Seven hells, why did it have to be Emmet versus Hastings?”

“Will you go then?” I ask with a hopeful smile.

“Fine,” he says. Then his eyes meet mine, and I feel trapped in his gaze. His next words come out soft. “I still can’t figure you out.”

“What do you mean?”

For a while he says nothing, just looks at me. Then he shrugs, his expression once again cold. “I don’t know. I just can’t stop wondering whether you’re an ally or my enemy.”

My stomach bottoms out but I try to play off his words with a casual laugh. “What makes you think I’m your enemy?”

“Your request to reschedule our date is accepted,” he says, ignoring my question completely. “I’ll meet you outside the arena.” With that, he gives me a dismissive bow.

I give him a curt nod. “Good evening then.” Without another word, I turn on my heel and leave the library, Podaxis following hard on my heels. We don’t speak again until we reach my room and close the door.

“That went well,” Podaxis says.

“He’s onto me,” I say and stride over to the wardrobe. “This might be my last chance with him. It has to happen tonight.”

“You think you can do it?”

“Yes.” I throw open the doors of my wardrobe. “With some help, of course. I never thought I’d say it, but it’s time to unleash the dress.”

“Unleash the dress? What dress?”

“*The* dress,” I say and extract the sparkly confection Nadia insisted I take.

“You’re wearing that to the Blessing Ceremony?” he asks with a grimace.

“Of course not. I’m wearing it to the boxing match. If it’s as enticing as Nadia says, he won’t know whether to look at me or the fighting ring.”

Podaxis taps his pincers, shrinking back a little. “You look like you’re about to go to war.”

“I am,” I say. Because tonight isn’t just a battle between Emmet and Hastings.

It’s between me and Dorian.

Life and death.

Right and wrong.
My head and my heart.
And this dress just might be the best weapon at my disposal.

30

Just before midnight, I make my way to the Emerald Comet Arena. I pull my coat tight around me—the long plum one with the sable trim—and try not to think about the scandalously flimsy dress I'm wearing underneath. I nearly tore it off several times when I looked at myself in the mirror and saw how the shimmery silk clung to my every curve. There's a good chance Dorian will be mortified when he sees me in it, which is the opposite of what I intend. But I have more pressing matters to concern myself with. Primarily, whether Dorian will show up at all. There's no sign of him as I walk from Cygnus to Halley, and even though I checked out my window time and time again before I left, I didn't catch sight of him leaving the church before me. He could have departed much earlier, or he could be following just behind. Still, I can't shake the dread that he isn't coming. That he bluffed when he said he'd meet me here.

But why bluff? If he was going to stand me up, he could have just sent me home during the Blessing Ceremony a few hours ago.

Which he didn't.

I'm still here.

The memory of tonight's ceremony has my shoulders tensing, just like they'd been then. Not only was I worried I was a breath away from being eliminated from the competition, but as Father Viktor addressed the audience with a review of what had occurred outside the public eye since the last ceremony—mostly mundane summaries of Dorian's dates—I was terrified Glint McCreedy or some other reporter would interrupt with shocking allegations that Dorian and I were spotted at Club Scorpius.

Thankfully, nothing like that happened, and when Viktor reviewed my interactions with Dorian, he simply stated, “They enjoyed a very brief chat about athletic sport.”

I scoff as I recall the mild smirk I caught on Dorian’s face after Viktor said that. *A very brief chat about athletic sport*. That was by far the most boring account Viktor gave of all the dates had today. He and Briony discussed their strangest dreams, he and Greta debated over the best stage plays, and Josie played piano for him. Then again, his date with Vanessa included an hour of the girl reading scripture. The way Viktor said it, though, made it sound like it was the most charming thing in the world. I suppose the church’s father would think that.

But what does Dorian think?

Is she his favorite as much as she is the church’s?

I shake the question from my head. Why should it matter what he thinks? What matters is that I’m still here and able to complete my mission. What matters is that Josie was sent home tonight, not me. Apparently, she and her pretty piano-playing were nobody’s favorite, for it was she who received the white flower—a daisy—while the rest of us were given yellow ones. She didn’t go home empty-handed, though, according to Podaxis. Rumor has it she received a proposal from Brother Christopher before she went home. One she accepted.

Good for her, I suppose. I recall how she said she *just wanted to marry anyone* that first night when all the contestants ended up in my room. Turns out, Christopher is anyone. And he didn’t seem too bad when I sat next to him at dinner.

As I draw near the arena, the sidewalk grows crowded with patrons lined up beneath the marquee. There are all sorts of people gathered here, from humans in top hats and evening wear to fae with pointed ears and flamboyant costumes. Not all patrons are dressed in their finest. I spot numerous others outfitted hardly better than street urchins. Upon further inspection of the crowd, I realize there are even some unseelie fae here, including a cluster of blue wisps, four purple pixies, and a puca. The latter stomps its hooves impatiently whenever the line ceases to move. I’m surprised to see any fae here at all. While I don’t know much about boxing, I always thought it was a primarily human sport. Apparently, my kind enjoy watching humans beat each other up as much as humans do.

I glance around the sidewalk, looking for Dorian amongst those not yet lined up to enter the arena, but don't see him anywhere. My stomach drops. Did he truly allow me to pass another round of the competition just to stand me up?

I feel a hand on my shoulder and startle. Whirling around, I find Dorian behind me. My heart flips upside down at the sight of him. Not that he looks much different than he did last night. Once again, he's dressed in only trousers and shirtsleeves, no waistcoat, no jacket, no cravat. The only addition to his ensemble is a hat, a brown tweed cap that reminds me of the one I like to wear when I'm disguised as a boy. With the sides of his hair trimmed so short, the only sign of his dark tresses is a cluster of messy waves just under the bill.

"Hi," he says, tone flat. His expression is empty, bordering on irritated. If he's excited about the match, he's doing a great job hiding it.

"You came," I say and offer a smile.

He doesn't return it. "I said I would."

I clench my jaw to keep from saying I liked him better when he was inebriated. At least then he was nice to me. I certainly hope my plan for tonight doesn't blow up in my face. This morning it seemed reasonable to assume Dorian was attracted to me, at least a little. That somewhere beneath the liquor last night, when he spun me in the streets and smiled at me like I was the only girl in the world, was truth.

But now that his icy demeanor is back in full force…I'm starting to think last night truly was my last chance to get him to kiss me. Not even my sparkly dress will turn his eye tonight, I just know it. Panic swims through me, and I'm tempted to call the whole night off and run back to the church. But the sentiment is fleeting, washed away by the deep knowing that I must go through with this. I must give it my best effort.

Otherwise, I die.

"Shall we?" I ask.

He nods and we head to the back of the queue. Everyone in line seems to be engaged in animated chatter regarding the match, but Dorian and I stand silently side by side. Every inch that separates us feels like it's weighted in iron. I note his every move from the corner of my eye, the way his hands are tucked in his pockets, the strange contrast in his posture—a carefree slouch with stiff arms that betray his discomfort. Even his silence feels heavy. Meanwhile, I can't stop my heart from pounding. I try to keep

my expression neutral, but I can't cease nibbling the inside of my tingling lips, and my cheeks are burning for no reason at all.

We move ahead a few places in line. I clear my throat and try for small talk. "Did…did you go to Club Scorpius tonight?"

He sighs, refusing to look at me. When he speaks, his words come out flat. "No. I'm not drinking tonight."

There goes all hope I'll be able to coerce him into a giddy, carefree mood. Podaxis was right. I messed up in not taking my opportunity when I had it. There's no way he'll kiss me. I clench my jaw and glance over at him, judging the distance between us. What are the chances I could spring myself upon him right now and plant my kiss before he tries to stop me? With his hands in his pockets—

"What?" he says, finally turning his gaze to me. His chest rises as our eyes meet, as if he caught his breath, and his posture goes even more rigid than it already was. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

I face forward. "I'm not looking at you."

"But you were."

"Is that a crime?"

He's quiet for a moment. "The way you look at me sometimes makes me feel like it is."

I don't know what to say to that so I remain quiet. But now he's the one looking at me and I'm beginning to grow tense under his scrutiny.

With another sigh, he looks away. "I like your hair," he mumbles.

I'm so surprised, I can't help but glance at him again. "You do?"

"You seem shocked by that."

That's because I am. While I tried curling my hair with the pins Nadia packed for me, it didn't turn out looking anything like Nadia's smooth waves. Apparently, it takes more than a couple of hours for them to set. In the end, I simply shook out my pink strands and tucked one side up with my shell comb like I've grown used to doing. "I thought it looked messy."

"It does," he says, but then his lips curl up at the corners, giving me a glimpse of the other version of him. He meets my eyes. "I like it messy. And the color. The pink is…really nice."

My cheeks warm and my smile mirrors his. I want to say something, perhaps about how I like his hair too, but I purse my lips instead. Now that I've gotten him smiling, I should do my best not to ruin it.

"Pardon," says a man behind us, tone indignant.

I blink a few times, realizing Dorian and I are still staring at each other…and have completely missed that the line has moved forward a few places.

"Apologies," Dorian calls over his shoulder, and we move forward in the queue.

The next time I spy him from the corner of my eye, he seems more relaxed, his expression softer, the ghost of a grin still tugging his lips. It's enough to set me at ease too. Allows me a moment to pretend.

Pretend I'm not on a mission but a real date.

Pretend the boy next to me likes me more than anyone else in the world.

Pretend I don't have to kill him.

THE INSIDE OF THE ARENA IS ENORMOUS. A RAISED BOXING RING STANDS AT the center surrounded by tiered seating. Private viewing boxes line the arena from a floor above, and even higher than that is additional seating, where the ring must look minuscule. That's where we should be sitting, considering I bought our tickets today and the match was nearly sold out. The tickets I briefly showed Dorian this morning indeed stated seats high in the rafters. However, it took only a few pockets to sift through and the most basic sleight of hand before I procured a better pair of tickets while we were standing in line.

We head for our improved seats, in one of the last rows of the first-floor tier. Shuffling past a few other patrons, we find our seats. Dorian immediately sits, but I hesitate. Now is the time to reveal the dress, but I'm not sure if I'm ready.

Dorian glances up at me. "What are you waiting for?"

I take a deep breath and start working the buttons of my coat. "I…I'm feeling warm." It's true, but it has nothing to do with the temperature inside the arena.

"Shouldn't you have done that at the coatroom?" he distractedly drawls, no longer looking at me.

"Perhaps," I say, but the truth is, I wasn't ready to leave my coat behind when we passed the coatroom. Even now, I'm tempted to leave it on, but I

committed to the stupid dress and—damn it all—I'm going to make sure he sees it.

With my buttons finally loosened, I shrug off my coat and set it on my seat.

Dorian half-rises from his seat. "What the seven hells are you wearing?"

"A dress." My skin prickles everywhere the dress leaves bare—which are all the places Dorian is looking now. The bodice of the iridescent dress has just enough fabric to drape over each breast and doesn't connect to the skirt until it reaches above my belly button. This makes it impossible to wear a corset with and leaves my collarbone, décolletage, and a sliver of my upper torso exposed. Dorian's eyes bulge as he drinks me in, and I don't know whether he's pleased or disgusted. Either way, I can't help but wonder what he'd think of the backside. The thin silk straps of the dress meet behind my neck, the back open aside from strands of pearls that crisscross from one side to the other and loop around to the front. Additional pearls hang from the top, creating makeshift cap sleeves. It will be a miracle if I make it through the night without accidentally snagging a strand and sending pearls flying everywhere.

Dorian blinks a few times and whispers, "That's hardly a dress."

"I am fae, you know. I don't have to wear clothes that cover every inch of my body." Although I'd like to, and right now I'm grateful that I at least wear long, elbow-length gloves. Pretending I'm a model of confidence, I keep my chin held high and lower myself onto my seat. I wave a flippant hand toward the audience around us. "Look how everyone else is dressed. I'm not the only one wearing a fancy gown."

"A fancy gown…that's not…" He opens and closes his fists a few times, still half-standing.

I meet his eyes with an innocent expression. "Aren't you going to sit down?"

With a muttered curse he drops into the seat next to me and rubs his brow. "I can't believe you're wearing that," he mumbles.

"What's so wrong with it?" I bat my lashes. Now I'm just plain enjoying his discomfort.

"It leaves very little to the imagination."

I huff a laugh. "Does that mean I'm robbing you of the pleasure of imagining me?"

He angles himself toward me and lowers his voice. “I’m not supposed to be drawing attention to myself. With you next to me…looking like that…” His throat bobs and his words seem to dry on his tongue. His eyes flash to my flimsy silk straps, to the pearls draped over my shoulders, then he pointedly looks away. Clearing his throat, he shifts awkwardly in his seat.

I suppress a grin as I look side to side, exaggerating my movements. Then I shrug. “I don’t see anyone looking at me.” As I say it, I feel his eyes burning into my profile. I slowly meet his gaze. There’s heat in his dark irises that I haven’t seen before. I don’t mean my next words to come out breathless, but they do. “Just you.”

“You’re infuriating,” he says, but it lacks the bite I expect. It’s almost a whisper, his voice so low it reverberates through my very bones. There’s no anger in his eyes. Just fire and trepidation. The look is so intoxicating, neither of us notices the fighters entering the ring. It’s only when a loud bell chimes that we both jump and cast our eyes to the center of the arena where the match has already begun.

31

As much as I've always admired the portraits of fighters, I've never seen a boxing match. I expect to hate it, that I'll hardly be able to stomach watching it—especially next to Dorian—without thinking of Astern Ariko's repulsive fae fighting ring. So I'm surprised by how quickly I find myself entertained. The two men, Emmet and Hastings, are both dressed in nothing but linen shorts and padded gloves. They circle each other, bobbing, weaving, and exchanging blows. When the bell chimes to mark the end of the round, they return to their respective corners, glaring at each other as they swallow down gulps of water. Then, as the bell marks the start of a new round, they rise to their feet and meet each other once again.

For the first couple rounds, Dorian remains reclined in his seat with an air of feigned boredom, jaw clenched tight as he refuses to look at or speak to me. As the match continues, he seems to give up on his unimpressed act and leans forward in his seat, elbows propped on his knees. Soon he's shouting exclamations when the men land any particularly impressive blows. Most of the time, I can't tell if he's cursing or praising.

Finally, after glancing my way a few times, he leans toward me. "Do you know what's going on?"

I scoff. "What makes you think I don't?"

A corner of his mouth crooks up. "Well, do you?"

"A little."

"Do you want me to tell you more?"

My first instinct is to refuse and tell him I can figure out the intricacies of blood sport just fine on my own. But I didn't bring him here to argue. I

brought him here to woo and seduce him, and this gives me a chance to improve the less-than-stellar interactions we've had tonight so far. Besides, there's a hopeful gleam in his eyes, one that has me nodding.

His expression brightens at my acceptance, and he leans a little closer. "The man with the red hair, that's Emmet. He's the reigning world heavyweight champion. The dark haired one, that's Hastings. He's the challenger. And he's amazing."

I watch the two exchange punches again. The men are evenly matched in bulk and stature, both with broad shoulders, bulging biceps, and thighs as thick as tree trunks. I can't help noting that I prefer Dorian's musculature, but that's a thought better left unacknowledged.

Emmet aims a punch at Hastings' midsection, but the other man hops away, dodging the hit with ease. "Hastings is fast, isn't he?" I say to Dorian.

"He is. He could run circles around Emmet, but he doesn't. He knows to conserve his energy."

"You're rooting for Hastings, then?"

"Damn right I am. I saw him fight one weekend back in Bretton. He's the next big name in boxing." He looks over at me with a wide grin. I can tell he's really enjoying himself and no longer trying to act unimpressed. "Who are you rooting for?"

I meet his eyes for a moment, feeling my pulse quicken at the sight of his easy smile. The transformation in his demeanor is almost breathtaking. I turn my attention back to the ring. "I haven't decided yet."

The match continues and Dorian tells me which punches are jabs, crosses, uppercuts, and straight rights. It's only a matter of time before I must confess I too am rooting for Hastings. His speed is impressive, matched only by the power behind his punches. Emmet is quite the fighter too, striking back just as hard whenever Hastings gets the upper hand. We watch Hastings go down after a brutal punch to the side of his head, but he's only down for a count of three. As each round passes, my heart beats faster, and soon Dorian and I are both on the edges of our seats, shouting with the crowd.

The eighth round passes. Then the ninth. Hastings goes down again. Then Emmet. Emmet again. The match continues and the fighters grow more bruised, show more fatigue during the rest intervals between rounds. As the tenth round begins, Hastings seems to come back with a vengeance. Suddenly, he uses his speed in both the offensive and defensive, his punches

faster, more persistent. Emmet, on the other hand, has slowed substantially and his reaction time isn't fast enough to keep up with Hasting's burst of energy.

"It's a gamble," Dorian says. "If Hastings wears himself out this round without beating Emmet, he could be at a severe disadvantage next round."

Hastings comes at Emmet, pummeling the other fighter with jab after jab. Or maybe it's a cross. I can't even tell anymore because I'm too wrapped up in the fight. I don't even remember standing, but I am and so is the entire crowd. Cheers and boos roar through the arena as Emmet starts to sag beneath Hastings' offense, his guard too slow to combat Hastings' relentless punches.

I bounce on the balls of my feet as I watch Emmet slam his gloves into Hasting's ribs to very little effect. "Rip his bloody head off, Hastings!"

Dorian barks a laugh. "That's a little much don't you think?"

I turn toward him and see his eyes crinkled with mirth and find myself laughing too. "Maybe, but—" Emmet stumbles backward and I whirl back to the ring. "Destroy him!"

Dorian joins me in shouting for Emmet's demise.

Hastings comes at him with one punch. Two. The next sends spittle flying from Emmet's mouth and he falls to the ground. The referee begins the count.

One.

Two.

Three.

The sound of the count is drowned by cheers and shouts as Emmet lies unconscious. He comes to around the count of four, but no matter how he tries to rise to his feet, by the time the count of ten comes around, he's still down.

Hastings wins the match.

A deafening cheer erupts all around and I scream right along with them, probably louder than I ever have before. Dorian and I turn toward each other, our wide-open mouths mirrored as we collide into a celebratory hug. It feels like the most natural thing in the world to embrace after such a shared victory until I become painfully aware of Dorian's hands on my bare back.

He seems to notice too and goes suddenly still in my arms. It's then I also realize how close we stand, our fronts pressed tight together, my

breasts against his chest with nothing but the thin silk of my dress and the linen of his shirt to separate us.

Far slower than we came together, we untangle inch by inch. His hands slide stiffly down my back, then to my sides, while my hands unravel from behind his neck and down his chest. There I pause. Or did he pause? I swallow thickly and hazard a glance at his face. His expression flickers between that stoic mask he so often wears…and something softer. Vulnerable. A flash of the heat I glimpsed in his eyes when he first saw me in the dress returns.

His face inches forward.

Pauses again.

My breath catches in my lungs but I don't move. Don't flinch.

Then his cold mask shatters entirely and his smiling eyes return, full lips arcing into a grin.

His mouth comes down toward mine—

At the last moment, I angle my head and his lips meet my cheek. I can't think of anything else to do but slide my hands the rest of the way from his chest and join the audience's applause. I turn back to the ring where Hastings holds up a gloved hand in celebration, and Dorian belatedly removes his hands from my sides. Even as I keep a placid smile on my face and try to seem swept up by the excitement of the win, I can feel Dorian's gaze burning into me. My flesh tingles where his lips landed, and it takes all my restraint not to bring my fingertips to brush my too-warm cheek.

OUTSIDE THE ARENA, THE SIDEWALKS ARE ABUZZ WITH CHATTER AS spectators discuss the match. Dorian and I say very little as we head down Halley and turn toward Cygnus. The silence between us is a relief. I'll take a quiet walk over the alternative if it keeps Dorian from bringing up the almost-kiss. And I'll do anything to avoid thinking about it too. Because if I think too much about it, I'll have to admit I failed. On purpose.

Our steps are slow and leisurely, and the farther we get from Halley, the calmer the streets become too. Soon only the sounds of our footsteps remain. Several inches of space remain between us—inches my senses home in on. Even that much space is too little. Or is it too much?

Thankfully, I've donned my coat again, so at least it isn't my bare skin that strays so close to him.

Dorian sighs. From my periphery I watch him look up at the sky. He pauses and wrinkles his brow.

I stop too and follow his line of sight. "What is it?"

"I was hoping I'd see the stars, but they're barely visible."

He lowers his eyes from the sky. When they lock on me, my lungs contract. I can't help but recall how he looked at me before he tried to kiss me.

Right before I ruined the very thing that was supposed to save my life.

"Yes," I say, bringing my mind back to the present. "They're rarely visible this close to this city."

"I miss the way they looked from my home court." With a shake of his head, he returns to walking. "I've missed them the entire time I was in Bretton. Either I've remembered my childhood all wrong, or the stars are brighter in Faerwyvae."

Mention of his childhood sparks curiosity in me. "What court did you live in when you were a boy?"

"Wind," he says, voice soft. His expression falls. It reminds me of what he said about his mother. He quickly shakes it away and forces a smile. "What about you? What was your home court like? Is your father's palace underwater?"

"No, Bircharbor Palace is at the edge of the Autumn Court. It was once ruled by King Aspen of Autumn, and his father, King Herne, before that. After the last war, King Aspen moved to Maplehearth Palace with his mate, Queen Evelyn. Now Bircharbor is the seat of the seelie Sea Court. The palace itself stands on a bluff and overlooks the ocean. Since my father is a seelie monarch, it helps having a palace on land where he can more easily engage with the human representatives and other seelie fae. I didn't spend much time inside the palace though. I preferred my private lagoon at the base of the bluff."

"And you grew up with your adopted brother…" He squints as if trying to recall my chaperone's name.

"Podaxis," I finish for him. "He's a fungus sprite. And yes, we spent almost all our time together."

"I remember you saying you had many other brothers too. Do you miss them?"

My heart sinks at the question. “I do. And do you miss your sisters?”

His expression turns somber again. “Very much so.”

My heart aches at the pain he’s trying so hard to hide. “What are they like? Your sisters?”

He looks down at the ground in front of him as we continue walking, and for a few moments, I’m not sure he’ll answer. “I wish I could tell you, but I wouldn’t do them justice. I haven’t seen them in ten years. I’ve only seen their portraits and conversed with them through letter while I’ve been away at school.”

“That’s where you were before the shipwreck? School?” I ask, trying to pretend I don’t already know the answer. Nimue mentioned him being sent to Bretton for schooling after his father was executed.

He nods.

“Did you like it?”

“I did. Probably too much.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s…complicated.” He purses his lips and it seems that’s all he’ll say. Then he speaks again. “The last few years I got it into my head that I was going to become a famous boxer like Emmet or Hastings instead of pursuing a more respectable career upon graduation. I started putting less attention into school and more into training and participating in amateur matches around campus.”

I look at him with wide eyes. “You’ve actually fought other men? In matches like we just watched?”

“Not as extravagant as that, but yes.”

“Did you win?”

“Sometimes. Other times I got beat embarrassingly bad.” A small smile flutters over his lips as if the thought of being so thoroughly beaten amuses him. It’s a fleeting expression and his countenance falls yet again. “I could have graduated two years ago, but instead…instead I let my education drag out longer than it needed to. If I’d taken my schooling more seriously, I could have come home before…”

He doesn’t need to finish for me to know what he’s trying to say. “I’m so sorry, Dorian.” My shoulder brushes his, and I’m not sure whether I stepped closer to him first, or he stepped closer to me. Neither of us widen the distance between us as we continue walking.

He takes a deep breath. “I didn’t even know she was sick. I had to hear it from my sisters’ letters after it had already happened. They said Mother didn’t want to worry me. She didn’t want me to feel obligated to come home. There were…reasons I was sent to school abroad.”

I think I know what he means by that, but still I ask, “What reasons?”

“My father died when I was ten.”

“Oh, my condolences.” My tone holds far less apology than I expressed over his mother’s fate. Because I feel none in my heart. It serves as a reminder of why I’m here, why *we’re* here. Together. Dorian is the son of a killer. He’s a killer himself.

As we take a few more slow steps down the sidewalk, I allow some space to grow between us, no longer running the risk of brushing his shoulder with mine.

But his next words almost stop me in my tracks.

“I’m not sure I am.” They come out cold.

I whip my gaze to him. “Why do you say that?”

“My father was not a good man. At least, he wasn’t the hero I once thought he was. When he died, I learned things about him that broke my heart, but I still saw him as a good father. Then after Mother died and I found out he’d cut her and my sisters from his will…only then did I see who he really was.”

“Your father cut his wife and daughters from his will?”

“They’d been separated for three years before his death. My mother left him. She had good reasons, ones that took me years to fully comprehend. Still, cutting her from his will I could almost understand, but my sisters…” He clenches his jaw and shakes his head. “He left me a sizable fortune and a trust for my education. He left nothing for them. Nothing. He gave them a weekly allowance when he was alive, but after he died, they were left to fend for themselves. My mother saw how difficult things were for me at home. I was dealing with some trauma that revolved around Father’s death, and I was bullied by my peers just for being his son. That’s why she sent me to Bretton for school. I left before I could see them slip into poverty. While I was comfortable at an elite boarding school, sitting in the lap of luxury thanks to my trust fund, my mother worked herself to the bone to care for my sisters. And when she died, I was busy wasting said trust fund, drinking, smoking, and fighting. Instead of being home, I chased a stupid dream to be a famous boxer. A dream I quickly came to despise when I realized how

differently things would have been had I graduated on time and come home."

I'm at a loss for words as I take in everything he's told me. That his mother left his father. That Dorian left the isle because he was bullied. That he feels so much guilt about the privilege he was gifted when his mother and sisters had nothing. My throat feels tight as I look at the pain etched in his features.

He speaks again. "She never asked me to come home. She never told me she was sick. My sisters' letters claimed Mother thought it was better if I stayed in Bretton and never came back to Faerwyvae. They said it was because she remembered how hard life was for me before I left for school. They insisted she didn't tell me she was dying because she loved me too much. But I can't help thinking it was something else."

"What?"

"That she was afraid of me. That she thought I'd be just like my father." He lets out a dark, humorless laugh. "Turns out she was right. She would hate me if she saw me now."

I open my mouth but I don't know what to say. I want to ask what he means by thinking his mother was right. Is it guilt that makes him think he's just like his father? Or does he harbor the very darkness the Alpha Council thinks he does?

My desperation to know the answer crawls up my chest, squeezing my lungs tight. It shouldn't make a difference. I shouldn't want to know the answer.

If Dorian lives, I die. It's as simple as that.

But what he's told me tonight has twisted my perception of him. Or perhaps it was twisted before and now it's just beginning to straighten out and become clear. Whatever the case, it sends waves of dizziness through my head, pulling me in every direction like a violent current. The realization that I might not be able to do what needs to be done, that I'm unwilling to save my own life…

It's too agonizing to bear.

32

When we reach the church, we make our way to the alley door and quietly enter. Pausing in the dark hall, we take a moment to ensure no one else is around. When we hear no footsteps, hear no sounds, we proceed through the next door and into the courtyard garden. My attention is so focused on the other side—on getting back to my room and sorting through my tangled thoughts—that I jump when Dorian's fingers come around my wrist. I halt and face him.

"I'm this way," he says, pointing his thumb over his shoulder toward the door I helped him through last night.

"All right," I say with a flat smile. "Goodnight then." I take a step, but he doesn't release me.

"Wait." The word comes out barely above a whisper. He takes a small step closer. His hand slides from around my wrist but instead of pulling it back completely, he draws his fingers down my gloved palm, then laces them through mine. "Thank you."

My heart hammers at the contact. It's so intimate, so vulgar by human standards of propriety. He's human. He should know this. And yet, we already broke those strictures tonight when we collided in an embrace at the boxing match. Not to mention, accidentally sleeping in the same bed. After too long of a pause, I say, "For what?"

"For tonight," he says with a smile. It's a kind smile. A sweet one. One that has my knees feeling like they might melt off my legs and send me tumbling to the earth. "I…I think I needed that more than I realized."

“It’s no problem,” I say, and the words come out stiff. I’m torn between tugging my hand from his so I can flee to my room…and staying perfectly still. Because now he’s slowly dragging his thumb back and forth over the back of my hand. Even through my gloves, the caress is enough to send a shiver down my spine.

His lips part as if he’s about to say something else, but the sound of a door opening has his mouth snapping back shut. Alarm flashes in his eyes. Neither of us are supposed to be caught out this late, much less together.

“Shit.” He pulls me to duck down as we scurry off the path behind a row of hedges. The sound of slow, quiet footsteps approach, and they’re coming from the door we just entered the garden from. The footsteps draw nearer, weaving along the garden path. Dorian tugs me farther from the sound, and we creep silently over patches of grass and flower beds. We stop when we reach the boughs of the enormous willow—the one I can see from my room. When the footsteps draw nearer still, we tiptoe farther under the tree and around the trunk until we’re on the opposite side. I press myself close to the trunk with Dorian behind me. I’m only half aware that the length of his body is touching mine. The rest of my attention is focused on the figure I glimpse between the shrubs. With the dark sky above and so many plants between us and the garden path, I can barely glimpse more than black robes and a hint of a face that looks like it might be Brother Billius. I furrow my brow. If he was coming from the alleyway door…did he see us? Whatever the case, it seems Dorian isn’t the only brother who sneaks out at night.

Billius picks up his pace and continues down the path. Soon he’s out of sight completely, and the sound of another door opening and closing reaches my ears.

I don’t dare move for several moments as I wait to hear if anyone else is coming. When it appears we’re safely alone again, I release a breath and turn around…

And find Dorian still pressed in close.

His forearm is braced on the trunk over my head and his other hand is somewhere near my waist. I back up as close to the trunk as I can, but that barely places more than an additional inch between us. My breathing grows shallow as I bring my eyes to Dorian’s.

His gaze roves from my eyes to my lips. I watch his throat bob. Then his focus settles somewhere around my nose. “You have freckles,” he

whispers, his lips so close I can feel his breath mingling with mine.

As breezily as I can, I say, “I have a lot of them.”

“They remind me of the night sky. The way it looks when you can properly see the stars. They’re…beautiful.”

No one has ever said that about my freckles. I’ve always known my complexion is anything but fair.

His gaze slides from my lips to my neck, then hovers over one of my shoulders. It’s then I realize my coat must have slipped down when we fled under the willow and now hangs off to one side. Slowly, he lifts the hand that had been propped near my waist and brings it close to my neck. There he pauses and meets my eyes, perhaps seeing if I’ll pull away.

I don’t.

He lowers his fingers and lights them over a strand of pearls trailing over my shoulder. “I like your dress.”

“You could have fooled me.” My voice is far raspier than I intend. It takes all my will to focus on my words and not the feel of him tracing the line of pearls again and again. “You didn’t seem to like it at all when I took off my coat at the match.”

“Maybe it was myself I was fooling.”

I roll my eyes, but I think all it does is make my eyelids flutter as he lightly tugs one of the pearls. “Whatever happened to me being an evil temptress?”

“I may have called you temptress but I never said you were evil.”

“You insinuated as much.”

His fingers still over the pearls and his eyes move back up my neck, my face, locking on mine. “Why didn’t you let me kiss you tonight?”

Any possible answer dries in my throat. I gulp a few times and try to steady my breathing until I manage to form a coherent string of words. “You kissed my cheek.”

A corner of his mouth flicks up. “Yes, and don’t try to pretend you didn’t know it was meant for your lips.”

I try to back up farther but there’s nowhere else to go. A searing warmth tingles low in my abdomen, making my head feel light. “You sound disappointed, but you didn’t like it when I tried to kiss you. It stands to reason those feelings haven’t changed. You dislike me, do you not?”

“I’ve never disliked you.” He brushes his fingers along the strand of pearls again, trailing it from my collarbone to the bottom of my shoulder.

He pauses and narrows his eyes. “But I haven’t fully trusted you either.”

“Why is that?” I ask, but I’m not sure I want to know the answer. It could strike too close to the truth.

“Because I can’t fathom why you’re here,” he says, sounding a little more like his old self. His cold self. The detached brother of Saint Lazaro. “Everyone else has a reason. An obvious one. Vanessa Courter is a religious fanatic who clearly can’t find a husband amongst her own circle. Greta Garter wants to be famous and have a wealthy husband to fund her goals for stardom. Briony Rose…well, she’s just bored of being stuck in a convent. And most of the other girls were simply desperate for a good match or forced by their parents.”

I feel a pang of something like jealousy over how accurately he describes the other contestants’ motives. It’s exactly what I learned about the girls the first day of the pageant. While it could suggest the girls’ pasts have been thoroughly investigated and revealed to Dorian, I’m fixated on the thought that he’s taken the time to get to know each girl so well. Well enough that he could like any of them…more than he likes me.

I shouldn’t care if he likes anyone else more than me. He’s supposed to be my victim, not my lover. I’m supposed to kill him, end him, punish him for the crimes of his past and all the things the Alpha Council is certain he is yet to do.

But it would be a lie if I said I still see him as I did when I accepted my mission. It started to change before tonight, but now that he shared so much about his past, how he feels about his father…

Now, he’s more than just a target. How much more, I don’t know. But he very well could be the death of me.

He continues. “You, on the other hand, are a mystery I can’t solve. The brotherhood thinks I should send you home, and they’re right. You aren’t the kind of wife the church wants for me. You aren’t the type of fae who will accept the *salvation* Saint Lazaro offers. You aren’t chaste or meek or subservient. If I’d obeyed Father Viktor, I would have eliminated you at the ceremony tonight. I should have.”

I frown. “So why didn’t you?”

He averts his gaze and his expression softens so thoroughly it almost seems to pain him. “Because I’m not ready to send you home.”

“Why?”

“Because you make me feel like the person I wish I could be. The person I pretended to be while I was at university. The person I can never become again.”

I hold my breath, hoping he’ll say more, dreading that he will, hoping he’ll pull away, fearing I’ll never feel warm again if he does.

His eyes return to mine, rich with agony. “Someone who deserves to be happy.”

I want to ask why he doesn’t think he deserves to be happy, but I can’t form a word, can do nothing but stare at his lips as he steps even closer to me. With his forearm still propped against the tree over my head, he lifts the other from my shoulder to my cheek, cupping it softly.

My vision blurs, mind spinning at the feel of his skin on mine, the gentleness of his caress, the cold knowing that he’s going to try to kiss me again.

And then it will be over.

My curse broken.

His life ended.

I shutter my eyes to clear them and watch as his lips part. “I shouldn’t kiss you,” he says. “I can’t kiss you. Kissing you could destroy me.”

So don’t, I try to say but my tongue won’t free the words.

“So badly I’ve wanted to, though. Every day since I pushed you away when your lips nearly compromised my vows and damned my standing with the church. You tempt me in every way. You are the most delectable ruin.”

He leans in.

My lips burn, dark magic swarming through them, rioting in anticipation of his kiss. His death. The end of their despicable power.

I try not to move.

Try to swallow my dread, stop my heart from aching, breaking, shattering—

“Why did you kill the fae?” I all but bark the words, wielding them like a shield.

He stops, his lips an inch from my own, and pulls back slightly. “What?”

“When you were a boy,” I say, voice quavering. “Why did you kill the fae?”

His hand slides from my cheek and drops to his side. He pushes off from the tree with the other, planting several more inches of space between us. “I never told you about that.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“Then you know who I am.” His voice is low, gravelly. “You know… what I’ve done.”

I nod.

“You know about my father too? How he died? His crimes?”

“Yes.”

His lips curl in anger. “I told you about my past tonight, and you said nothing. You acted like you didn’t know.”

“Please,” I say, my voice breaking with desperation, “just tell me how it happened.”

“If you know what I’ve done, what else is there to say?”

“I’ve heard only rumors, but I need to know what’s true.”

“You mean, about me being a killer? About how I stabbed a sea fae—a creature that had been chained in iron, weakened by torture at my father’s hands—and bathed in her blood? About how feeble she was when I killed her? How I could have warded her off with one swipe and instead stabbed her seven times?”

I recoil at that, my stomach roiling with disgust. Pinning him with a glare, I back away from him until I feel myself come up against the tree again.

“That’s the look I remember.” He shakes his head and lets out a bitter laugh. “That’s how everyone looked at me before my mother sent me to school. That’s how my peers looked at me before they kicked me unconscious while calling me a fae-killer. Thank you for the reminder. It helps me think maybe Mother was right in never wanting me to come back here. Maybe her actions had been done out of love after all.” With that, he turns around and stalks away from me.

I stare after him, mind reeling. I should be satisfied. He told me what I needed to hear. He gave me the fuel I need to end his life.

But I can’t help feeling like he still hasn’t given me the full story. There’s more and I need to hear it from his lips.

I race after him and grab hold of his wrist just as he reaches the outer veil of the willow branches.

He stares down at my hand. I know he could easily shake me off, but he doesn't. His gaze slowly slides to mine.

"Tell me the whole story," I say.

"What else is there?"

"Everything. What happened? How did it start? Why did you kill her? It was ruled as self-defense and…I want to know why."

He holds my gaze for several moments, eyelids narrowed to slits. Then, slowly, his face softens. "You really want to know?"

"Yes."

He steps farther under the tree, returning to safety from prying eyes. Crossing his arms, he plants his back against the trunk of the tree. He looks so tired now. So defeated. With a sigh, he closes his eyes and hangs his head. "The summer I was ten, I stayed at my father's manor for a week."

I hold my breath and wait for him to continue.

"He was still my hero then. I didn't understand why my mother had left him and wanted nothing more in the world than to be at his side. It was supposed to be the best week of the summer. I was convinced Father would teach me to fight, share with me his skills as a brother in the Order of Strength. The reality was far from that. The week passed and I barely saw my father for more than a few minutes a day. He spent much of his time out of the home, and every night he went to the cellar. Others came too. A few nights that week, the front drive was littered with coaches. I was forbidden from seeing what all the fuss was about, so naturally my curiosity grew unbearable. It was my last day with Father and he was gone again. So I did as any boy my age would do. I stole his keys and crept into the cellar."

He folds his arms tighter, shoulders stiff. "That's when I found what he'd been hiding. His fighting ring. It was more than just a makeshift arena, it was…horrifying. Blood stained the middle of the floor, iron weapons hung in elegant glass cases, rusty cages lined the walls. Only one cage was occupied, but the empty shackles in the others told me they once had been too. I thought the body belonged to something dead, so I crept closer to investigate. Then the figure began to stir, and I realized there was something living in there. A fae. She had pointed ears and brown and white scales covered in scars and bloody gouges."

His description sounds just like Zara, aside from the bloody gouges. I remember her saying the murdered fae had been her sister.

He continues. “She began to whimper when she saw me, cowering away from the cage doors. I told her I wasn’t going to hurt her and she began to calm down. Then she begged me to open the cage and let her free. I was nervous to oblige and said I’d get my father to help instead. I was certain he knew nothing about what was happening in his cellar. How could he? He was strong and good and kind. The fae pleaded, and she sounded so miserable I knew I had to help her. I finally did as she asked, unlocking her cage and iron cuffs with my stolen set of keys. But as soon as she was out of the cage, she turned on me and attacked, shouting that she would *kill his vile spawn*. She raked serrated claws over my arms, my belly, dug her teeth into my shoulder and tore the flesh from my bones.”

I shudder at the reminder of the scar tissue I glimpsed on his shoulder when I saw him shirtless in the training room.

He absently runs a hand over the shoulder, expression vacant, posture hunched. His voice is quiet, strained, as he proceeds with the tale. “I knew nothing of fighting then. Had no concept of how to defend myself. All I knew how to do was run, but when I did, she followed. She tackled me and slammed my head into one of the weapons cases, shattering the glass. I fell to the ground, felt my hands sliced by falling glass and blades. Anger coursed through me then, and I felt a hatred I’d never known before. She came at me again, gnashing her teeth as she charged. I rose to my feet to meet her, and in my hand was one of the weapons—an iron dagger—that had fallen free from the broken case. Her teeth came toward my neck, but my blade met her throat first. With a hiss, she staggered back. There she hovered for a moment, hand clenching the bleeding wound at her neck. Then she charged again, throwing herself on me. I fell under her weight and defended myself with the weapon I still held, stabbing again and again, unable to see beyond the tears in my eyes, unable to hear anything but my own sobs.

“Soon I realized she wasn’t moving anymore. And it wasn’t just tears in my eyes. It was blood. I struggled to free myself from under her lifeless form, and when I managed to get loose, I ran. In a daze, I left Father’s manor and fled toward home—to Mother’s townhouse in the city. On the way, I was stopped by a couple in a coach who saw me drenched in blood. They took me to the sheriff where I relayed what happened. By the evening, my father was taken into the sheriff’s custody, but it took far longer for me to understand what had happened. That my actions had exposed an illegal

fighting ring. My *father's* fighting ring. That he'd been the one to cage the fae. That the one I killed had been locked in his cellar for three years, cuffed in iron, tortured, and forced to fight both her own kind and humans. At first, I didn't believe it, but soon there was no evidence to refute the claims. Furthermore, there were new claims that I hadn't killed in self-defense but murder. I ignored the tales that suggested I'd been training in the ring myself when the incident occurred, but when I heard how weak the fae was when she died, how the first wound I inflicted had been enough to kill her…I started seeing things differently. Instead of recalling the way she charged me after I sliced her throat, I realized it was more likely she'd fallen forward and I was merely too stunned to get out of the way. And when I stabbed her all those extra times, fueled by hate…" He pauses and runs his hands over his arms as if to ward away a chill.

My heart aches and my hands burn with their desire to console him. I take a step closer but keep my hands firmly at my sides. "Dorian…"

He meets my eyes, expression vacant. "Now you know the truth. I'm a killer."

"It *was* self-defense."

"It's hard to believe that matters when I recall with such vivid detail the rage that filled my heart and infused my hands when I ended that fae's life. You'll never know what that's like. To be disgusted by what you've done but unsure if you regret it."

I step closer again, my skin prickling from what I'm about to say. "I know far more than you realize."

He scoffs. "I doubt that."

I take a deep breath. "I killed someone."

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He snaps his mouth shut. “What?”

I repeat it again, slower. “I killed someone.” I’m not sure what even compels me to say it, only that I feel an agonizing need to show him I understand.

A flash of fear crosses his face, and his posture goes rigid. In that moment, I want to swallow my confession and curse my idiotic desire to empathize with him. Then he lets out a slow exhale and his eyes go soft. “Tell me,” he whispers. There’s no demand in his tone. Only invitation.

My throat tightens, constricting the words I’ve never admitted to anyone but my father and Podaxis. Words that make me a monster. I hold his gaze, trying to force out the tale that builds in my chest, barbed with iron, ready to be free after so much time hiding in the cage of my darkest heart. I twist my fingers at my waist as if they could unravel the knot of truth. Tears prick my eyes.

“I won’t judge you,” he says. “You know I can’t.” Then he takes a step away from the tree trunk and lifts his hand toward mine, still tangled at my waist. I go still beneath his touch, let him take one of my hands in his. Holding my gaze, he reaches for the cuff of my glove and dips a finger beneath it. I furrow my brow, unsure what he means to do, but I make no move to stop him. Slowly, he peels the glove down my arm and away from my fingertips, leaving them bare. His eyes don’t leave mine as he tucks the glove into my coat pocket, then weaves his fingers through mine.

I stifle a gasp. If I thought holding his hand through gloves was improper, this is a whole other level. But I can’t say I dislike it. His palm is

warm and strong. Steady. My breaths grow deeper, the tightness in my chest loosening. Keeping our hands tightly clasped, he guides us to the tree until we're side by side, our backs pressed against the trunk. He keeps his gaze fixed straight ahead, and I understand the gift he's giving me. Like this, I don't have to look at him while I confess. His hand is all the reminder I need that he's there.

How he knew this is what I needed, I have no idea.

Finally, I speak. "I told you before that I spent most of my life as a seal. That's how I liked it. I never had the desire to learn the magic it took to remove my sealskin, and Father never encouraged me. He said it was safer that I remain a seal anyways. That I didn't need to learn magic like my siblings. For years, that was enough. I liked watching my cousins dance on the shore in their seelie forms but never had the urge to join them. As I got older, my brothers would invite me out on their excursions to town where they'd drink and visit brothels, but I never agreed. Until one day I did."

I nibble my lip. In the beat of silence, Dorian squeezes my hand again.

"Just over a year ago, I felt the first urge of curiosity about the world outside my lagoon. I loved my lagoon, loved swimming in the ocean around the palace beach. But I was reaching maturity. I don't know why, but for the first time, I wanted to know what else the world offered. I told one of my brothers that I was ready to learn to remove my sealskin and see the town, but I didn't want Father to know. I felt guilty for my desires. I knew how much he seemed to want me to remain a seal. I was his baby. His only daughter that hadn't already moved away, and I was aging too fast. Far faster than fae ever had before. And that pained him. I knew it did. He wanted to keep me coddled, and for so long, I thrived on that. But not forever. So, in secret and at night—the only time safe for a selkie to remove her skin before she's taken human clothing—I had my youngest brother teach me how to find the hidden seam in my sealskin, how to peel it back and remove it. Podaxis thought it was a grave mistake, that nothing good could come from leaving our lagoon. My brothers, on the other hand, encouraged my efforts, brought me my first clothing. Once I'd mastered the art of shifting forms, they took me out to celebrate. I visited my first pub, tasted my first ale. My brothers eyed me like a shark, ensuring I never left their sight. I watched people dance, watched them kiss. I met my brothers' friends, their human lovers. And then…I met Luther."

I shudder at the taste of his name on my tongue.

“Then again, I suppose *met* is the wrong word. In truth, I was warned against him. The boy looked at my siblings as if he knew them well enough, but his eyes remained on me for the rest of the night. This wasn’t lost on my eldest brother, and he told me never to be alone with the human boy. I thought he was just being overprotective, but I said I understood. At the end of our excursion, my brothers took me home, and I relayed my night’s adventures to Podaxis. He listened anxiously, mortified that I was brave enough to leave the comfort of our beach. He was even more disturbed when I wanted to go out the next night too. This time, I wanted to go alone. At least, I wanted to go without my brothers. I yearned to explore town without them constantly shadowing my every step. Podaxis tried to talk me out of it and wouldn’t be persuaded to come. So I left on my own. I returned to the pub, ordered another ale, and quickly learned the first benefit of being chaperoned by my brothers. There was a thing called money and I didn’t have it. The barkeep asked me to leave, but a man saved me from my embarrassment by sliding a few chips across the bar. When I went to thank my rescuer, I saw it was Luther, the boy I was told to stay away from. I thanked him and had every intention of leaving it at that. But curiosity struck me again, and I wanted to see what was so bad about this young human man. So, when he asked me to have a drink with him, I agreed. One drink turned into two, two turned into many, and many turned into a very enjoyable evening. I stayed out with Luther all night, talking, drinking. I even attempted a dance, much to my embarrassment. When the sky began to lighten, I knew I had to come back to my lagoon before anyone found me missing. That’s when Luther walked me home.”

My pulse pounds and my head begins to feel light. I lean back and close my eyes, letting myself sink into the firmness of the tree trunk. All the while, Dorian’s warm grip serves as an anchor as the memories replay in my mind, as bright as if they were yesterday.

“He walked me all the way to my lagoon, where I bid him goodnight. He, however, didn’t seem to want our time together to end. Instead, he lingered, delivering compliments and sweet words that made me feel as if I were the most beautiful creature that lived. He asked me about my sealskin, said he was willing to bet it was as pretty as me. I thought nothing of it when he begged me to show it to him. So I did. I took it out from its hiding place under the nearby rocks and let him examine it, all the while keeping my grip firm around it. Then he thanked me and asked for a kiss.”

I nearly choke on the last word. I probably shouldn't have said it. I probably shouldn't be saying any of this. There's too much truth, too much —

Dorian's thumb slides over the side of my hand, and my panic begins to lessen. He says nothing, doesn't prod me to continue. Maybe that's why I do.

"I didn't kiss him, not at first," I whisper, feeling ice crawl up my spine. "Instead, I offered him a hug. It was my first hug in seelie form, and I liked it. Liked the way he held me tight, the way he ran his hands over my back and through my hair. I liked it too much. Felt lost in the embrace. So lost, in fact, that it took me several seconds to feel my sealskin sliding from my hands. At first, I thought I'd dropped it, but when I opened my eyes and pulled away, I saw he was clutching it behind his back. I met his eyes and saw an expression I'd never seen before. Something cruel and cold and calculating. Before I could comprehend what was happening, he leaned in and pressed his lips to mine. They were hard and forceful, like he thought a kiss would erase what I saw him doing. And that's when I understood it. He was stealing my sealskin. Rage tore through me, and hate boiled my blood. That's when—"

I stop myself just in time. Just before I could admit the one thing Dorian can never know. My heart hammers in my chest, pounding from my story. I take a few steadying breaths, choosing my words with care. "I killed him. It was an accident, but I unwittingly used fae magic and ended his life."

Silence hangs between us in the wake of my story. Hidden beneath my truth is what I've left unsaid. That I killed Luther with a kiss. That one moment he was trapping me against his unyielding lips, and the next, I kissed him back, kissed him with a force that almost felt like passion. I'm not even sure why I did it. I was furious at what he was doing, but all I could think was to take control of the situation, deepen the kiss, maybe even enjoy it in all my rage before I stole back my skin. But I never needed to try and steal it back. Soon after I kissed him, he staggered away as if I'd struck him. Then he choked, coughed until his face turned blue. Died at my feet with my sealskin still clutched in his hands.

My tone darkens. "So, yes, Dorian, I know exactly what it means to be disgusted with myself for something I've done while not knowing whether I should regret it. Luther, it turns out, was known for stealing sealskins from selkies and selling them. Had he succeeded, and had I not been wearing

human clothing, I would have died when the sun rose. My father easily took the blame for what I'd done, for even attempting such a crime is punishable by death. And yet…it doesn't change what I did."

Finally, Dorian moves. Keeping my hand in his, he angles his head toward me. "You did nothing wrong."

I meet his gaze. "Maybe you didn't either."

He shakes his head. "You should hate me for trying to hide my past."

"How can I hate you for it? You don't see me confessing to anyone else about my prior crimes."

"Yes, but I've been trying to hide my past from the woman I'm supposed to marry. I'm courting a woman of fae blood while omitting the fact I killed one of her own kind."

I frown as unanswered questions rise to the surface of my mind. "Why are you trying to hide who you are, anyway? You've claimed sanctuary. You're safe from punishment for crossing the border until your term is over."

He shifts his stance against the tree, expression agitated. Although, I'm not sure it's because of me. "Father Viktor insisted we make no attempt to reveal my past. We aren't exactly hiding it. I'm still using my own name. I will not lie about the truth if I'm directly asked. But that was one of the terms I agreed to when Viktor laid out his plan to help me. In exchange for the church's aid in securing me a bride, I would participate in their efforts to improve their reputation. Making it public that they're harboring a killer doesn't quite do that, does it? Thankfully, the Alpha Council hasn't publicly outed me. I'm sure that's due to me keeping it a secret that my ship was attacked by fae creatures. Mutual secrets make for a tense alliance, I suppose."

I wonder what that means about us. We now share each other's darkest secrets. Are we allies now? Something…more? I don't voice these questions. Instead, I ask, "What do you mean about the church wanting to improve their reputation?"

He doesn't answer right away. "Saint Lazaro isn't what I expected it to be. When I made plans to come home, I knew there was a chance my ship would be intercepted. Or that my case would be rejected at Vanmar Island. My sisters told me in their letters that locals still talk about me. Still scorn me. Still debate over my guilt. Pleading for aid from Saint Lazaro was supposed to be my last resort, one I knew I'd have to use as soon as my ship

was attacked. My father had been well-respected amongst the church's ranks when he was alive, and I thought the fae-hating church would secretly praise him as a hero. But I was wrong. When I woke up in the church's infirmary, I told them who I was. Who my father was. I expected to see awe in Father Viktor's eyes. Instead, he looked repulsed. I begged him to help me, but he offered only sanctuary, nothing more."

I'm surprised by this. I too would have thought the church held Astern Ariko as their secret hero, but I must admit the church isn't quite what I expected it to be either. Yes, they harbor some strange ideas about the fae, some that make my skin crawl. But…they don't seem to hate my kind the way I thought they did.

"It took a full day to get him to even speak to me again," Dorian says. "When he did, he started to relent. He begrudgingly accepted the idea that I could help the church. He told me how, while I'd been living in Bretton, the Church of Saint Lazaro declined in popularity year after year. Their numbers dwindled. The majority of Faerwyvae's people—humans and fae alike—couldn't forgive the church for the rebellions they stirred. The only hope for the church to proliferate was when the brothers took an Order and married. Still, the brothers weren't often seen as desirable, especially in this city where pleasure and desire can be found in far less daunting places than a church. Father Viktor told me all about their efforts to bring the church into the modern era of Lumenas, hosting parties that no one attended, putting on bridal pageants no one participated in. That's what he realized I could help with. Or my face, at least." His tone falls flat at this last part.

"Your face," I echo.

He rolls his eyes. "He thought I could attract an audience if I were to participate in one of their bridal competitions."

I think back to the first day I saw Dorian's portrait on the sign outside the church. Father Viktor wasn't wrong. Dorian's handsome visage drew crowds of admirers.

He continues. "I agreed to everything without a second thought. The church would help me secure a fae bride to solidify my citizenship in exchange for me being the public face of their congregation for a week. They would take my sisters out of the workhouse they've been in since my mother died so long as I agreed to select a proper bride as determined by Father Viktor. To protect my sisters further, they would draft and file my will. Should anything happen to me—should the fae disregard my terms of

sanctuary and come after me—my inheritance would go to my sisters. In exchange, I must join the brotherhood. Not just as an initiate or an acolyte. I must be a brother, take an Order, and represent Saint Lazaro for the rest of my days." His voice sounds strained, heavy with remorse.

I shrink at the thought that he could be disappointed that the church isn't what he thought it was. That he would be more enthusiastic about joining their ranks if they were the violent enemies of the fae he expected them to be. But, no, I know better now. Still…I remember what he said at dinner that first night. "Why did you defend their rebellion?"

He sighs. "Part of me believed what I was saying. Sometimes, when I hear how many people were displaced after the last war, I think the humans were right to rebel. The humans weren't consulted. We weren't given a chance to leave. We were told that the fae were saving us from annihilation and owed them our allegiance thereafter."

"The fae ruled the isle long before humans first set foot here."

He gives a resigned nod. "I know. Maybe the fae were right. Maybe we did owe them our lives after they saved us from certain death. But it doesn't change what happened after. Unification may have opened fae lands to humans, but it also disrupted some people's homes. Their careers. The climate changed to suit every court. The terrain shifted. Humans in government no longer had a role to play. Have you any idea how extreme such changes were to some people?"

I furrow my brow. Dorian can't be older than twenty, which means he wasn't born until a couple of years after unification. Regardless, I've heard it took many years for the isle to adapt to all the transitions. Some courts are still adapting now. Meanwhile, I spent most of my life cozy in my lagoon, witnessing none of these hardships. "You speak as if you experienced these things firsthand. Did you?"

"Not exactly," he says. "My mother's family did, though. Her father was the mayor of one of the towns in the Wind Court. After the war, he was nothing. My grandparents went from aristocrats to paupers overnight. That left my mother with only her husband to rely on." His tone turns bitter.

As determined as I am to never admit the church's rebellion was anything close to being justified, his perspective is one I've never heard. One I don't think many humans are brave enough to confess. Especially not to a royal like me.

“At the end of the day, I don’t agree with Saint Lazaro’s rebellion,” he says. “While part of me wanted to defend it that night, I also said it because I thought it’s what Father Viktor wanted me to say. I thought it would impress him and prove my heart is with the brotherhood.” He shakes his head. “He was not at all impressed if you couldn’t tell. And I’m glad he wasn’t. I’m relieved Saint Lazaro isn’t a cult of zealots. Just as much as I’m relieved to find not all fae are monsters and tricksters.” He looks over at me with a small, sad smile.

I try to return it but can barely manage more than a subtle flick of my lips through all the guilt that weighs me down. Fae in general aren’t monsters. But I am. I was sent here to kill him and I agreed to it.

Dorian doesn’t seem to notice the shame in my eyes. “Despite all that, if there had been another way to care for my sisters, one that didn’t require me to join the brotherhood, I would have preferred that.”

“So you could continue your dream of becoming a boxer?”

He lets out a low laugh. “No, that dream has set sail, but I would like to do…something. I just don’t know what that would be. There’s no use wondering now unless I can get Father Viktor to relent. My future is promised to him, to follow his guidance, and I’m willing to do whatever it takes to protect my sisters and give them the lives they deserve. But it doesn’t stop me from wondering who I could be if it were up to me to decide what I want. What I stand for.” His expression holds so much yearning, so many hopeless questions. It reflects the way I’ve felt while running from Nimue and my dark magic. How many times have I daydreamed about what it would be like if I wasn’t hiding from the Sea Witch? If I could kiss a lover without ending their lives? Dorian may have willingly accepted his situation while mine was agreed upon before birth. Even so…it’s the same. We both feel trapped. Suppressed.

Killing him was supposed to change that for me.

But now…

Now what?

I try to burn the question from my mind, but it plagues me, pierces my heart.

A squeeze against my palm reminds me Dorian is still holding my hand. I glance at him and find his eyes on me, probing. I feel as if he’s looking far deeper than I want him to.

“Two killers,” he says under his breath. “What does that make us?”

I shake my head, unsure what he's asking.

He leans in closer until our foreheads are almost touching. "Are we kindred spirits who understand one another? Two souls cut from the same cloth? Or are we two volatile components that should never be combined?"

His question takes my breath away, as does the shift in his gaze. From confusion…to something like desire. Now more than ever I fear he might press his lips to mine. It's a thing I'm now certain I can't do, regardless of what it means for my fate. I take a step back and begin to tremble from head to toe. "Dorian, there's something else—"

"Brother Dorian." The voice comes from the other end of the garden. Footsteps pound on the walkway and I hear Dorian's name called again. We peer through the willow branches, once again finding Brother Billius. This time, he isn't creeping quietly around. He looks frantic.

"Seven hells," he mutters. "They know I'm not in my room. Stay hidden. I'll pretend I was out for a breath of air and draw him away so you can get back to your room." He turns back to face me, but before his eyes can meet mine, he turns violet, frozen. Beneath the purple haze of the Twelfth Court, I slip my hand from his and disappear through the nearest wall.

34

The next morning, I learn what all the fuss had been about, courtesy of Podaxis. According to the intel he gathered while spying, the church collected Dorian's sisters from the workhouse as promised, and they arrived in the middle of the night. The girls refused to be settled in the women's wing until they saw their brother. I already figured as much, for I watched him embrace the two girls from my window, saw as they cried happy tears upon seeing him. I didn't let myself witness more. Partially because I was recovering from my escape through the Twelfth Court. But also because I couldn't bear to watch. Couldn't handle seeing the very thing I almost ruined.

Everything Dorian is doing, he's doing it for *them*. His sisters. Had I succeeded at my mission that would all be over. I suppose it's some consolation that the church has supposedly filed a will that bequeaths his inheritance to the two girls, but that doesn't change the fact that I nearly took him away from them. Not only that, but…just *him*. His life. His breath. His beating heart. How did I ever consider ending that?

And now…

Now…

"Have you listened to a word I've said?" Podaxis taps his hind claws, front pincers crossed. He glares up at me from the floor while I sit at the edge of my bed.

I shake my head. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"I said many things, none of which you cared to pay attention to. Most recently I stated your night must not have been successful if Brother Dorian

still breathes."

"He did not kiss me, if that's what you're asking."

"He didn't even try?"

I purse my lips, but my refusal to answer speaks volumes.

"Maisie," he says with a gasp. "Don't tell me you—"

"I don't want to talk about it," I say, rising to my feet and striding to the window.

He follows close behind. "You're still going to complete your mission, right?"

I bite my lower lip. The tingling seems to be intensifying with every day that passes, a constant reminder of Nimue's enchantment, one that was supposed to set me free, put an end to my dark magic. I stare out at the garden, the shrubs and flowers bright beneath the morning sun. But my eyes see only the willow tree. The place I learned the truth about Dorian and he learned the truth about me. Where he saw a fraction of my darkness and didn't turn away. Steeling my resolve, I face my friend. "The Alpha Council is wrong about Dorian. He's not some evil murderer. When he killed the fae, it truly was done in self-defense. He was attacked and he bears the scars to prove it."

"I'm not even going to ask how you've come to see these supposed scars, but…regardless. It doesn't matter, Maisie. It's his life or yours."

"I can't do it, Podaxis."

He lifts his claws in an exasperated gesture. "Then what will you do? Let Nimue's curse claim you instead?"

I tap my foot, mind reeling. "I don't know what I'm going to do yet, but I must do something. I'll…I'll write to my father. Tell him that he must sway the Alpha Council to change their mind about him. Revoke the order for his assassination."

"How will that help? You only have three days until the curse your mother placed on you kills you. Three days to convince your father to miraculously change the council's mind. And then what? You still have a bargain with Nimue. One you agreed to. One that ends in your death should you refuse to fulfill it."

"If the Alpha Council revokes the assassination order, Nimue can't hold me to our bargain."

He gives me a pointed look. "Can't she?"

My stomach sinks. He's right and I know it. Besides, what would I even say to my father if I were to get a letter to him? *Dear Father, the worst has come to pass and I'm now an assassin, just as you feared I'd become. But don't worry, it's only one kill I've agreed to in exchange for freedom. However, in my attempts to murder my target, I've learned he's innocent. Please tell the rest of the Council. Yours truly, Murderous Daughter.*

And then what? Nimue lets me go? Revokes our bargain, ends my curse, and lets me live happily ever after? No. Even if she were forced by the Alpha Council to call off the assassination, I'm still her subject. Her property. I doubt she'll have any qualms about letting me die if I fail to fulfill our agreement.

"You must see reason," Podaxis says, tone pleading.

"Are you suggesting I kill an innocent man?"

He taps his pincers together, beady eyes glazed. "No, but…I can't handle the thought of you dying for him. Can you?"

I open my mouth to say no, because I know that's what he wants to hear, but the word doesn't form. Instead, I say, "Maybe."

Podaxis shrinks back as if I slapped him. "Maisie…"

My throat tightens at the quaver in his voice. I drop to my knees in front of him, fatigue and heartache dragging down my bones. My voice comes out small. "Last night changed everything, Podaxis. He's become something to me. I don't quite know what yet, but he's…so much more than I thought he was. I don't want to die but I can't let him die either."

He hesitates a moment, then taps my shoulder with a claw. "What will you do now? Do we leave the competition?"

I shake my head. "Not yet. First, I'm going to make sure Dorian chooses a proper wife." The last word twists an iron dagger in my heart, but I do nothing to try and chase the pain away. It's a pain I should probably get used to. Because I doubt it hurts nearly as much as it will when I force Dorian to send me home.

A FEW HOURS LATER, INITIATE JEREMY ARRIVES WITH TODAY'S AGENDA. Individual dates are to be replaced with a small party later this evening to celebrate the arrival of Dorian's sisters. Podaxis returns to his room. Since

tonight's event is a group gathering, providing plenty of female companions, chaperones won't be necessary. Instead, Podaxis will be spending time with Nadia. Neither of us mentions the elephant seal in the room—that he's clearly begun to court her. Whether Nadia knows it or not is another question. Whatever the case, I'm happy for them. It helps ease my nerves as I prepare what I must say to Dorian.

At six in the evening, Jeremy returns to escort me to the party. I pause outside the parlor, where the gathering will be held, and take a few breaths to collect my composure.

"Are you ready?" Jeremy asks with a furrowed brow as he gestures for me to enter.

After another breath, I nod.

I enter the parlor and find Dorian sitting in a chair by the fireplace, eyes crinkled in amusement while one of the two girls on the couch reads to him from a book. Glint McCreedy sits in another chair, sketching in his notebook, and Brother Billius sits alone at an empty card table. There's something morose about his posture and the way he stares at nothing. I recall him skulking about last night, coming in from the alleyway after Dorian and me. Now that I know he was looking for Dorian to inform him of his sisters' arrival, it makes sense why he was sneaking around in the dark. I assume he didn't want to get Dorian in trouble for being out of his room and was trying to find him discreetly. Why does he look so sad?

Dorian glances up from his sisters, and his eyes immediately find mine. My breath catches at the sudden shift in his expression, his lighthearted mirth slipping away. I expect his cold mask to return, that he'll reveal regret over what we talked about last night, over how close we became in more than just the physical sense…but that's not what his features hold. There's an intensity in his gaze, yet his face isn't hardened with the same serious quality as it once was before. No, it's something else. Something that makes me feel as if I'm dressed in my shimmery gown again. Next-to-naked. Desirable. I'm back to more modest clothing tonight—a simple silk evening gown in pale blue. Even so, his gaze seems to bore straight through me, beyond my eyes, my flesh, to my very core.

Noticing his shift in attention, the two girls turn toward me. Their faces brighten. Both look so much like their brother, with his bronze skin and black hair. They're dressed in simple wool gowns with faded hems. One appears to be a year or two younger than me, while the other looks closer to

Jeremy's age. Their lips bear smiles, but I see signs of fatigue written in the circles beneath their eyes, their slightly slumped postures. Their arms, even hidden beneath long sleeves and plain gloves, look too thin. I'm stricken by the thought of either of them having just returned from a workhouse. I've never been in one, but I've heard rumors of their miserable conditions.

"You must be Miss Maisie," says the youngest-looking girl.

"The pretty one with the pink hair," the other whispers to her sister with a mischievous grin. Louder, she says, "We've heard so much about you already." They fall into a fit of giggles. At first, I think they're making fun of me. Then I realize their teasing isn't for me at all.

Understanding dawns and my eyes flash to Dorian's. I find him looking mortified. Ignoring their statement about me being *the pretty one with the pink hair*, he rises clumsily to his feet, and gestures for his sisters to do the same. "Miss Maisie is a princess, so we address her as Your Highness."

"Princess," the eldest says with a gasp. "He never mentioned that."

"No, and now I realize I should have," he says with a sideways grin. "Might I introduce my sisters, Beatrice," he gestures to the eldest girl, then the youngest, "and Tabitha. This is where you curtsy, dear sisters."

"Oh, right," says Beatrice, and they dip low, their movements clearly unpracticed.

"I'm sorry," Dorian says with a bashful smile for me. "Meeting royalty isn't an everyday occurrence where they're from."

"What he means is we're ruffians," Tabitha says.

"That's not what I mean at all." His chastising tone is betrayed by laughter. He appears so at ease with them, so soft and playful. It seems their ten years apart didn't strain their familial bond. I recall the guilt he expressed last night about being at school when his mother died. The way his sisters laugh so easily in his presence, I take it they don't hold the same grudge he holds against himself.

"Fret not," I say, "because I too am a ruffian, and Dorian knows how much I dislike being referred to as Highness."

Tabitha's eyes widen and she whispers to Beatrice, "Did you hear that? She called him Dorian. First name basis." There's no condemnation in her tone, only excitement. They laugh behind their hands and Dorian rolls his eyes. I cast a quick peek at Glint, who scribbles furiously away, catching our entire interaction in his notebook. Great.

Footsteps sound in the hall outside the parlor. A moment later, Greta and Briony are escorted inside by their initiates, and the introductions are made all over again. I note—with no small amount of pride—that neither Tabitha nor Beatrice says anything to the newcomers to suggest Dorian has spoken much about *them*.

I chastise myself for even caring. It would be better if he'd said far more favorable things about *anyone* but me. I'm not the one he can marry. I can't secure his citizenship on the isle, because in three days, I might not be alive to…

Panic lashes through me, but I breathe it away.

Now is not the time to consider my fate. It's time to consider *his*.

Greta offers greetings to Dorian and his sisters, then floats over to Glint. He calls her *darling* and they exchange air kisses next to each other's cheeks, then settle down for what looks like an interview.

Briony sidles up next to me. "At least one person thrives off the attention of the public," she says with a laugh. "Aside from Vanessa, of course. Have you read her interviews in the papers? She does nothing but extol the virtues of chastity and fae salvation."

I laugh but can't bring myself to say anything against the girl. Ever since I stole Vanessa's bracelet and ultimately got her punched in the face, I can't help feeling at least a little bad for her. Not that I like her any better in spite of it. I glance around, seeing no sign of her. "Where is Vanessa, anyway?"

"Miss Courter isn't feeling well," Billius says, speaking for the first time. His eyes remain unfocused, brows knitted with concern. "She must be dreadfully ill indeed, for she didn't even want to leave her room for confession. She adores confession." He says this last part almost wistfully.

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. Is that why Brother Billius looks so sad? Does he fancy Vanessa?

"I'm certain she'll recover," comes Dorian's voice. I find him approaching me and Briony with a sister on each arm. "Would either of you like to join my sisters for a game of Whist?"

Briony offers an easy yes while I confess I don't know how to play.

Beatrice leaves her brother to take my arm. "I'll teach you. Come, Your Highness. It will be fun."

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The card game turns out to be fun after all, and I pick up the rules rather easily. Dorian calls for tea, and the mood grows light and fun.

Glint comes to ask us questions as we play, and Sam Sputnik arrives shortly after to blind us now and then with his camera flash. Not even that manages to irk me as I get swept up in the game and the joy of the three girls around me. We fall into fits of laughter as we lay down card after card. I catch Dorian looking over at us from his place on the couch time and again. His expression is soft and doting whenever he looks at his sisters, then penetrating when he locks eyes with me. I can't tell if his gaze is the same when he stares at Briony or Greta. *Does* he stare at them? He must. It makes no sense he'd only have eyes for me. No matter how hard I try, I find myself holding his gaze far longer than I should.

"We should have dancing," Tabitha says after we tire of Whist.

"I haven't danced in ages," Beatrice says, tone rich with longing.

Greta lets out an exaggerated gasp and struts over to us. "Oh, I do love dancing."

Tabitha glances around the room. "Does anyone play the piano?"

"Poorly," Briony admits.

"Not even a little," I say.

Tabitha's lips quirk into a grin. "Then you'll have to tolerate my clunky playing." She leaves the card table and takes a seat at the modest pianoforte. Without much preamble, she starts into a lively tune. The song is unfamiliar, and my first instinct is to back away. Even though I've come to enjoy dancing on occasion, I normally pair it with at least a glass of

Starshine. Before I can take even a step away, Beatrice links her arm through mine and turns us in a skipping circle one way, then another. Then we separate and she does a light-footed toe tap. I hardly have time to study her moves before she takes my arm again for another skipping turn in the opposite direction. “This is how we dance at taverns back home,” she says with a giddy smile.

Beatrice seems a little young to already be frequenting taverns. Then again, she and her sister are young to be in a workhouse too. With what Dorian has said of their poverty, it makes sense the girls would want to find whatever reprieve from their daily hardships that they can. Seeing how bright and kind the girls are despite what they’ve been through sends an iron shard straight to my heart. Somehow, they haven’t let their situation harden them or made them stop trusting. Stop loving. Stop smiling. It makes me feel a bit ashamed for how closed off I’ve been to everyone but Podaxis this past year. I’ve had my reasons for keeping my distance, but still…

When Beatrice next returns to the toe-tap move, Briony and Greta join in to copy her. She shifts and sways, skipping from foot to foot, adding more complicated moves, more turns, and soon the four of us are laughing as we try to keep up with the rhythm. It takes a while, but soon I’m able to grasp the moves. Or some semblance of them. I feel like a fish floundering on the shore, but I must admit I’m having fun.

Beatrice turns me in a circle again, and when we separate, I find Dorian watching from the couch, his face alight with mirth.

“Brother Dorian,” Glint McCreedy says from a chair next to him. His voice is a touch too loud, as if that’s not the first time he’s tried to get his attention.

Dorian shakes his head and drags his gaze away. “So sorry. What was the question?”

“Your nuptials will take place by midnight the day after tomorrow. Do you have a ring for your intended?”

Beatrice and I turn again, so I can no longer see his face. However, his words have somehow taken precedence over the music, my ears attuned to them even as I skip and tap.

“I do,” he says, “but it’s nothing more than a gold band. I plan on getting my bride something far more spectacular after we’re married.”

“Is that so? And what do you plan on getting her? Diamonds?”

Another turn, and Dorian returns to my line of sight. I don't realize I'm staring until his eyes flash to mine.

He lifts a corner of his mouth. "I prefer pearls."

The word makes me miss a beat, and I stumble to find my footing again.

"Pearls?" the reporter says. "An unconventional choice, but one I daresay will flatter whomever your bride shall be."

I don't let myself look at him again, but it doesn't stop his next comment from invading my every awareness. "I am already confident she looks dazzling in them."

I falter again and pause completely. "Sorry," I say to Beatrice who was just about to take my arm for another skipping circle.

She says nothing, but her eyes narrow slightly. Then she calls out, "Dorian, take my place. My feet grow tired. Come dance with the princess."

"Oh, it's all right," I say, taking a step back. "I don't mind sitting down too. My feet are clearly not cut out for this."

"Nonsense." She winks. "I want to see my brother dance. It's a sight I haven't witnessed since we used to take turns standing on Mother's toes while she pranced us about the house." She says it with so much longing, there's no way I can refuse.

Dorian doesn't argue either and strides over to me. He takes Beatrice's place and gives me a formal bow, all the while maintaining a sly grin. I curtsy back and realize the music has stopped. When it starts again, it's a slow rhythm. I resist casting a glare over at Tabitha. I'm starting to think this was planned.

"My sisters like you," Dorian says as he places a hand lightly at the middle of my back. The other he holds up and out to the side. I set my gloved palm loosely over it and we start into a basic waltz, one of the few formal dances I'm somewhat acquainted with. There's ample space between us—nothing like how we were at Club Scorpius—and our postures are stiff and formal. Even so, my hand buzzes with warmth as I recall the way it felt when he slid off my glove and pressed our naked palms together.

"I like your sisters too," I say, keeping my gaze anywhere but his face. I glance around to make sure no one else is anywhere near before I say, "There's something I need to tell you. Before you send me home tonight—"

"What makes you think I'm sending you home?"

I meet his eyes for only a moment and find his dark irises trained on me. "You told me last night that Father Viktor doesn't like me."

“I never said he didn’t like you. I said he wants me to eliminate you from the competition. He likes you well enough. Just…not as the wife of a brother.”

“Same thing,” I say, ignoring the way his words set my teeth on edge. I already know who the priest’s favorite is. Even though I’ve come to regret what I did to Vanessa, I hate the thought of her and Dorian together. I hate the thought of him and *anyone* together.

Anyone but me, I think, but quickly banish the sentiment.

I reaffirm my resolve. I can’t risk leaving until I know for sure Dorian will choose a bride who can secure his citizenship. Lowering my voice as quiet as I can, I say, “You must hear me out. Greta’s ears are prosthetics.”

He laughs, the sound far too loud for the confidential nature of our conversation. “Are you jealous?”

I want to deny it, but the word *no* won’t form on my lips. “Why would I be jealous?”

“Why else would you try to get her kicked out of the competition?

“I’m being serious,” I whisper through my teeth as we continue to turn about the room to Tabitha’s slow song. “She might be part fae, but I’m not certain she has fae blood at all. Don’t get me wrong, I like her. Far more than Vanessa. But if you marry her, and she’s lying, your citizenship will be invalid—”

“I know she’s lying. We all do.”

I’m taken aback by that. “Then why is she still here?”

He releases an agitated sigh. “She’s popular with the people. Apparently, she’s been in several bridal pageants before this and is always well-liked. Father Viktor insisted we keep her as long as we can to keep our audience happy.”

I furrow my brow. I suppose that’s good. It means he’s safe. He knows Greta can’t secure his citizenship and will choose a proper bride. Either Briony or Vanessa will do, as much as the thought sends waves of anger writhing through me. “Well, then,” I say, “I suppose this is our last dance.”

He quirks a brow that shows he doesn’t agree. “Is it?”

I find my body drawn closer to his, eager to erase the formal distance we hold. Instead, I pull as far from him as I can without disrupting our dance completely. “Yes, Dorian. You and I both know it’s true. You told me what could happen if you refuse to obey the brotherhood. They could end

your term of sanctuary, refuse to oversee your wedding, stop helping you and your sisters."

His expression turns pained at the mention of his sisters.

"You know I'm right."

He averts his gaze, eyes steely. We step, turn, and sway without another word. It's a silence that burns. A silence I wish with every beat of my heart would be filled with his voice. The music feels harsh without his low timbre, his laugh.

But this is how it should be. This is how it *must* be. Now the song just needs to end.

"You have no one to be jealous of." My breath nearly catches at the return of his voice.

"I never said I was jealous."

"Still, I thought you should know that no one else holds a candle to you."

My heart races, and I feel his hand slide lower down my back. I doubt he even realizes he's doing it. I hardly notice when our dance moves start to bring us closer. Nor do I care that we seem to be the only ones dancing while Briony, Greta, and Beatrice watch us from the sitting area. My head starts to feel light, and I know I should step away. Instead, I lift my eyes to his. There's so much depth in them as they stare down at me. So much wanting. Pain. Desire. "Dorian…"

"I like when you say my name," he whispers.

"You shouldn't—"

"Good evening, good evening." A new voice, loud enough to cut off the music, rings through the room.

With a startle, Dorian and I break away and find Father Viktor standing before the threshold. His lips are smiling but his eyes are hard as they lock on Dorian.

I take an exaggerated step away from him just to widen our proximity.

"It appears tonight's gathering has been a delight," Viktor says, turning his gaze to the other contestants, then Dorian's sisters. "The Blessing Ceremony will commence in one hour, and this one will be special. The four remaining contestants will give a speech to the audience about why they would make the best choice for Brother Dorian. Allow your young guides to escort you back to your rooms so you may prepare."

At that, Jeremy and a few other initiates enter the room. Without a second glance at me, Dorian rushes to Father Viktor's side. He says something in a low voice. I only make out a few words, and it appears to be a request to speak in private. Swallowing down my curiosity, I hurry to Jeremy's side and follow him into the hall. Chatter sounds behind me as the other girls trail behind us, but all I can focus on are my thoughts.

I'll have to make a speech tonight.

About how I'd make the best bride for Dorian.

As much as it turns my stomach to consider giving a public speech, this just might be the opportunity I need.

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An hour later, I stand on the dais in the nave next to Briony and Greta. It seems Vanessa is still feeling ill. With vicious delight, I wonder if that means she'll forfeit her place in the competition and be sent home. With Greta unofficially disqualified, that would leave Briony as the victor. It's a thought that has my heart plummeting to my feet. Briony Rose is the contestant I like more than all the others combined, but I can't find it in me to feel even remotely happy for her.

I keep my eyes fixed firmly ahead in my efforts not to look across the dais at Dorian. Instead, I scan the audience. The pews are packed tonight, which tells me people must be growing more and more invested in seeing Dorian's premarital saga unfold. After tonight, only two more Blessing Ceremonies remain. The last will end in his wedding—and his safety from further assassination attempts.

But I won't be here past tonight.

Father Viktor greets the audience with his usual fist-to-heart gesture and prayer. After that, he gives a brief summary of this evening's events. He leaves out the part where Dorian and I were caught dancing far too close, of course. Next, he announces tonight's special inclusion of speeches given by each contestant. I hold my breath, unsure who he'll call to speak first, but it's none of us. None of us present, that is. Viktor delivers his apologies for Vanessa's absence and says she is unwell. She managed to write a speech and Brother Billius has apparently agreed to relay it.

Billius takes Viktor's place at the center of the dais and recites her words with fervor. What follows is a tedious account of Vanessa's purity,

accomplishments, and attributes. Then her words turn to fae salvation and her deepest desires to wash them clean of sin. I can't stop myself from rolling my eyes, especially when her speech details her dreams of an entirely seelie isle. They're words that border on treason, and I'm surprised she lacked the tact to keep them to herself.

When curiosity gets the better of me, I slide my gaze to Dorian, finding his expression has returned to the stern mask he wears for the brotherhood. Gone is the smiling, lighthearted boy he was with his sisters this evening. Or the passionate man he is with me.

I swallow hard and look away.

After what feels like an eternity, Brother Billius concludes Vanessa's message. It results in delayed applause, as if the audience had as much difficulty tolerating the speech as I did. Billius steps off to the side, and Father Viktor calls on Greta. The applause quadruples as she takes center stage. She really is the people's favorite.

Greta performs a dramatic monologue about her longing for love and her overflowing desires for a life of holy matrimony. It sounds more like something she picked up from a script than her own true feelings, but the audience loves it all the same. They swoon and sigh, brush away tears when she pretends to weep. If nothing else comes from this, it seems Greta is at least getting adequate acting practice. Maybe she won't need a husband to help her pursue her dream career after all.

After her speech ends, it takes a while for the applause to die down. Viktor ushers her to the side when she continues to curtsy and wave. Once the audience returns to silence, he calls the next name.

It's mine.

I'd assumed I'd be called last, considering how Father Viktor feels about me. My heart begins to hammer when I realize the time has come for me to say what I must.

I take a deep breath and move to the center of the dais.

"Tell us, Princess Maisie," Father Viktor says. "Why would you make the perfect bride for Brother Dorian?"

My gaze sweeps over the audience as I gather my courage. "I wouldn't."

The audience gasps at my unexpected statement.

For a moment, I close my eyes, inhaling and exhaling deeply. When I open them, my resolve is firm. I speak again. "I wouldn't make the perfect

bride for Brother Dorian at all. In fact, I'm the worst choice he could ever make."

People in the audience exchange quirked brows and confused whispers.

I continue. "As you all know by now, I'm a princess. What you've also likely discovered is that I'm not your average royal. There's nothing regal about me. I'm clumsy, undignified, and unrefined. For the past year, I've worked as a thief. I steal things. I've probably stolen items from a good portion of you."

Horrified faces blink back at me, while some wear crooked grins as if they can't tell if I'm joking.

I shrug. "I like stealing and always have. I love shiny objects and rarely feel remorse for the things I lift. Although, I do feel a little bad about one thing I did. The second night I was here, I stole a bracelet from one of my fellow contestants and planted it on another, all in the hopes that one of them would get sent home instead of me."

From the corner of my eye, I see movement. Dorian has stepped forward. I refuse to meet his gaze. "It worked, though. I'm still here. But I don't deserve to be any longer. I will not make a gentle or subservient wife. I've no interest in what the church calls fae salvation. I refuse it. Fae magic isn't evil. As the good Father Viktor once said himself, evil is not the automatic property of one person, one group, or one organization. Evil is the property of people and can belong to anyone. And I've since learned Saint Lazaro isn't an evil entity. Misguided, perhaps, but not evil. Neither are the fae. So I will not spout the church's teachings or praise their Almighty. Not until they see faekind the way I've come to see the brotherhood. As people, just as flawed and susceptible to good and evil as anyone else. Not demons in need of saving. Until the day the church can prove they've outgrown old-fashioned notions and do more than simply host a colorful pageant while labeling it *modern*, then…well…I suppose the brotherhood can kindly fuck off."

Silence hangs in the air. My lungs tighten in the wake of my words. Cursing the brotherhood was admittedly over the top and fills me with no small amount of regret. Everyone here has treated me far kinder than I ever expected the ill-reputed church was capable of. Even Father Viktor's disapproval of me is understandable. But I knew I had to cross the line. It's the only way.

The *only* way.

With a deep breath, I return to stand next to Greta and Briony. Only then does the audience begin to react, first with laughter, then with applause. I keep my eyes unfocused, arms stiff at my sides. My knees tremble, my composure threatening to unravel.

Not yet. Keep it together just a little more.

"Well then," Father Viktor says with a grimace, "I apologize for that rather colorful language from Princess Maisie. Next, let's hear from Briony Rose and pray to the Almighty her speech will be far less scathing."

The audience chuckles, but I hardly hear it. Nor do I comprehend a word Briony says. All my attention is absorbed in the heat of Dorian's glare as his eyes burn into my profile from across the dais.

BRIONY'S SPEECH FEELS LIKE IT FLIES BY FAR TOO FAST. SO DOES everything after. Brother Billius hands Dorian four flowers. Roses this time. One is white, while the others are red. Dorian calls Greta to join him at the center of the dais. He hands her a red rose. Then Father Viktor invites a random girl from the audience to accept Vanessa's rose on her behalf. A pretty blonde accepts a red rose, giving in return a heavy dose of batted lashes and simpering thanks. Then Dorian says my name.

My name.

Too soon.

Far too soon.

This is where it ends.

With a deep breath, I walk to meet Dorian, stopping a few feet before him. He holds the two remaining roses, one in each hand. Chatter breaks out over the audience, and my pulse pounds as I drag my eyes to meet his. His expression is pained. He makes no move, hands me no flower.

Finally, he starts to lift one of the roses.

Dread and relief tumble through me, crashing against my heart like a tidal wave.

The rose is red.

Everything in me wants to accept it, my fingers beg to reach for it.

But I don't.

"Give me the white rose," I whisper through my teeth.

His jaw is firm, tense. “No.”

“Give it to me. Now.”

“No.”

My shoulders tremble. “I’m not leaving this dais until you give me that white rose. I’ll rip it from your hands if I have to.”

His face falls further, and I watch his throat bob.

I barely notice when Father Viktor comes up behind him. “Give her the white rose.” His voice is soft, almost apologetic. It’s enough to set my lower lip quivering.

Dorian’s fingers curl so hard around both stems, his knuckles turn white. I hear a snap, and look down to see the white rose tip, its stem shattered. It hangs from just a thread of green. With an audible intake of breath, he shoves the broken white rose toward me. The one that spells an end to this game. To *us*.

I take it and turn away. I don’t stop when I reach Greta and Briony. I don’t stop at the bottom of the dais. My feet take me down the aisle, past pews of watching eyes until I greet the quiet corridors outside the nave. Only then do I let my tears fall.

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As soon as I reach my room, I throw the white rose on my dressing table. Then I storm over to my wardrobe and start tugging the clothes from inside and shoving them unceremoniously into my carpet bag. I hate the way tears stream down my cheeks, the way my throat burns with my efforts to stifle my sobs. I'm not even sure why I'm crying. All I know is that the harder I work at packing my bag, the more my limbs tremble. The more they beg to collapse.

I struggle to fit all my dresses in a single bag, and the fight leaves me at once. Cursing between my teeth, I slump onto my bed and rest my head in my hands. A minute passes. Perhaps several do. Soon I hear a soft knock on my door. I can't be bothered to respond. Nor do I say anything when I hear it open. Podaxis' telltale clack of claws follows, as does a pair of footsteps.

My heart leaps into my throat when I consider whom the latter could belong to. I rise to my feet and whirl around. Luckily, it's only Briony who enters the room with my crustacean friend. She closes the door behind them.

"What are you doing here?" I swipe at my tear-stained face, realizing I must look like a complete mess.

Podaxis stops by my feet, eyes turned down at the corners. "I was worried about you," he whispers.

"So was I." Briony gives me a sad smile. "After a speech like that, and all. It was so potent I don't think anyone listened to mine."

"Sorry," I say with a sniffle. "I didn't mean to steal your spotlight."

She waves a flippant hand. “Don’t worry about that. I’m certainly not. I hardly put any effort into my speech at all, for I was certain I would be the one sent home tonight.”

“Instead, it’s me,” I say dryly and return to my bag. This time I try to fold my things neater so they might fit better. When that still doesn’t help, I consider leaving them all here. If Nadia wants her costumes back, maybe she’ll do me a favor and come get them for me. I shove the bag aside in search of my sable-trimmed coat. When I find it, I shrug it on, pointedly not meeting Briony’s gaze. “I should go.”

“Are you all right?”

I ignore her and focus extra hard on my buttons as I secure them, fighting off a fresh wave of tears welling up in my eyes. It only makes matters worse when Podaxis taps a consoling claw against my ankle.

“Maisie.” Briony’s voice is firm. She closes the distance between us and places a hand over mine—still fumbling with my buttons—and forces my shaking movements to still. She repeats her question. Slower this time. “Are you all right?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” My chin quivers, but I convince myself she doesn’t notice. “I said what I said for a reason. I’ve known all along that I don’t belong here.”

“I don’t know why you said what you said, and I trust every word was true.”

“Then you know why I’m not the right choice for…for him.”

She snorts a laugh. “That may have been your intention, but the only thing you succeeded at is showing why you are the *only* choice for him.”

I shake my head. “That makes no sense.”

“It makes sense to the rest of us. And anyone with eyes. The two of you share something special. Perhaps you have from the very start.”

“What we have are a lot of arguments.”

She gives me a sly grin. “That’s just an ugly word for passion.”

I open my mouth but I’m too tired to convince her she’s wrong. Taking a step back, I bend down and lift Podaxis, then brush past her to the door. “If you win, be good to Dorian and his sisters, all right?”

Briony follows hard on my heels. “Maisie, are you sure you’re all right?”

My lips remain pressed tight. The truth is, I don’t know if I’m all right. I don’t know if I’ll ever be. Because of my actions, I’ll likely be dead in three

days' time.

But…because of my actions, *he* will live.

That's all the comfort I can keep. Maybe it's enough. "I'm as all right as I can be."

She gives me another sorrowful smile and squeezes my arm. I try to smile back but doubt my lips do anything more than press into a deeper line. "Goodbye, Briony Rose." I open the door to make my escape…

Dorian stands on the other side.

HE DOESN'T HESITATE BEFORE BARGING IN, FORCING ME TO TAKE SEVERAL steps back. His jaw is set, eyes cold. He looks nowhere but at me, not even bothering to acknowledge Briony or Podaxis. His voice comes out like a low growl. "Why did you do it?"

With a grimace, Briony slips out the door and into the hall.

Podaxis squirms in my arms. "I should give you some privacy," he mutters.

"No—"

Before I can stop him, he leaps to the floor and scurries out after Briony.

I glower as he makes his traitorous retreat, and Dorian slams the door in their absence. "Why did you do it?" he asks again. This time, there's pleading in his tone.

My lungs constrict as I try to maintain my composure. I lift my chin. "You know why."

He storms closer until only a foot of space remains between us. I try to widen it but find my back come up against my wardrobe doors. He puts a hand to his chest, expression pained. "I wasn't ready."

I latch onto his statement, let it slice through me like an iron blade. Fury rises in my chest, crashing against my bones. "You weren't ready?" I say through my teeth. "That's what you have to say to me? I did what needed to be done, and *you* weren't *ready*? How long were you planning on stringing me along? Until the final night? Until I watched you walk down the aisle with your new bride? Are you truly so cruel and unfeeling?"

His chest heaves as he studies my face. He places a hand just inches from my head, propped on the wardrobe door, and leans in. "Would that

have hurt you? To see me take someone else as my partner?"

"Yes," I say, my confession barbed with iron as the word grates against my tongue. "Which should have been reason enough for you to let me go."

He narrows his eyes. "Then you admit it. You have feelings for me."

I want to scream in his face that I don't, but I can't fool myself enough to believe it. "It doesn't matter what I feel. We can't be together. I will not be responsible for you losing everything you've sacrificed for."

He hangs his head and growls in frustration. When he returns his eyes to mine, there's grief in them. "I spoke with Father Viktor after the party tonight. He was coming close to giving me the freedom to choose—to *really* choose—the woman I want. You just destroyed all of that."

My heart flutters at the thought of him bargaining with Viktor—about me, about *us*—despite knowing it could endanger his standing with the brotherhood. Hope threatens to swell in my chest, but I drown it, cursing it to be dashed upon the jagged rocks of reason. "I would have destroyed more had I stayed, trust me."

His expression softens. "Maisie—"

"You can't want me. I'm not what you think."

"Then tell me what you are." He brings his other hand next to my head, framing me between both hands now. Lowering his face, he stops when our foreheads nearly touch. I angle my chin, keeping my lips firmly out of his reach. I know I should push him away. Shove him hard before this ends badly. But I can't find it in me to move. His proximity is intoxicating, sending fire roaring in my belly. A smile creeps into his voice as he speaks again. "I already know you're a temptress. A selkie. A woman. A beautiful, frustrating, complicated creature. What else are you?"

I could tell him. I could tell him everything. I *should* tell him everything. Instead, I stay silent, keeping my secrets buried in my heart. Secrets that could wipe away the desire burning in his eyes and make him hate me forevermore. But I don't have forevermore. I only have a few more days. Am I a monster for wanting his memory of me to stay how it is now? With him wanting me?

"Tell me you don't have feelings for me," he whispers.

"I…" Words turn to ash in my throat.

"Tell me you don't love me at least a little."

My stomach flips at the word *love*. He can't mean that. He couldn't possibly feel anything like love for me. We hardly know one another. I can't

love him.

Can I?

Is love the reason I'm willing to sacrifice myself to a curse just to save his life? Or would I do that for anyone?

I already know the answer. Memories of last night when we confided in each other under the willow tree flood my mind. I told him things—things about my past, about what I did to Luther—that I've hardly told anyone. He shared truths with me as well. Even before that, when we laughed and cheered and cursed at the boxing match, I felt something. I hadn't allowed myself to admit it then, but I enjoyed my time with him. Just like I enjoyed dancing in his arms at Club Scorpius, being pressed against him when he caught me under the lyra.

I don't know when I started falling for him, but I have. Maybe it's only a tumble. Maybe it's more. Whatever it is, it feels bigger than anything I've let myself feel before.

And now…

The treacherous wave of hope rises again, but I drag it down, reminding myself that nothing has changed. None of this matters.

Not how he feels.

Not how I feel.

In allowing him to live, I accept my death.

But…perhaps I can die with one final gift. A place to leave my heart when I trade this world for the realm of death.

I take a deep breath. "Dorian, I—"

The door opens without any pretense of subtlety and closes with a slam. Dorian and I startle and pull away. Whirling around, I find Vanessa staring daggers from across the room. She doesn't look at all like someone who has been ill all day. Instead, she looks at the peak of health with rosy cheeks, dark hair meticulously curled, her burgundy satin gown without a single wrinkle.

She props a hand on her hip and leans against my closed door. "What a compromising position," she says. Her voice holds far more malice than I've ever heard. Even her expression is twisted in an unfamiliar smirk.

"Miss Courter," Dorian says, voice strained. "Please stay out of this. This is a private matter between me and Miss Maisie. I'll ask you to step out and return to your room."

“Oh, did I interrupt?” she says with mock innocence. “Wait…were you going to kiss her? Don’t mind me. That’s something I’m more than eager to see.”

I take another step away from Dorian and smooth the skirts of my dress. “What are you doing here?”

Her mouth falls open in an exaggerated gasp. She takes a step forward and folds her arms over her chest. “What am *I* doing here? The better question is what are *you* doing here? Why don’t you tell him, Maisie? Tell him what actually brought you here.”

I furrow my brow, eyes narrowing as dread crawls up my spine. “You don’t seem sick.”

“I’m not.”

“Where have you been?”

She examines her nails in a bored manner. “I had a body to dispose of.”

Dorian stiffens. “Excuse me?”

Her eyes flick to mine, and her dark irises flash to a pale shade, the pupil shifting into a shape like a *W*. The eyes of a cuttlefish.

“Zara,” I say, taking a step back. “You killed Vanessa.”

“What?” Dorian looks from me to the false Vanessa, then throws an arm out in front of me as if to shield me from the threat he’s only now starting to understand. “What’s going on?”

Zara ignores his question. “I didn’t kill Vanessa. She’s tied up at the bottom of her wardrobe. Her chaperone, on the other hand…”

“Brothers!” Dorian bellows, and his voice rings out strong and deep.

Zara simply rolls her eyes. “No one can hear you. I put a silencing enchantment over the room, and a locking enchantment on the windows and doors. Spells I learned from Maisie’s mother. Did she tell you her mother is the Sea Witch, the most powerful enchantress in the ocean?”

Dorian says nothing, only edges closer to me.

“No? She never mentioned the Queen of Assassins at all? Perhaps you’ve at least heard of her. Queen Nimue, Unseelie Queen of the Sea Court. Maisie’s dear mother.”

My mind reels. Did Nimue send Zara to compromise my mission? I glance around the room, seeking something that could help me defend myself if she attacks. There’s nothing but sparse furniture and a framed painting. That won’t do a thing when she has sharp claws. Ones I can’t see

right now but know are hiding beneath her disguise. “Why are you here? How long have you been Vanessa?”

“Since last night.” Her scales flutter, briefly revealing the visage of Brother Billius before returning to Vanessa. “I followed you in from the alley. I’ve been watching you, trying to gauge if you were capable of fulfilling your mission. When I realized you clearly weren’t, I knew it was time to take matters into my own hands. Something I’m more than happy to do. Dorian and I have unfinished business.”

Her gaze turns to Dorian and her scales flutter again, this time turning a deep blue. She remains in humanoid form, but she has no hair, only fins, gills, and large eye sockets filled entirely with black. If her true appearance is what I saw at Nimue’s palace, this is yet another glamour.

Dorian, however, seems to recognize it. Keeping his eyes on Zara, he reaches for my arm and tugs me halfway behind him. “You attacked my ship.”

“And you doused me in oil and pushed me into a fire.”

“You tried to kill me.”

She bares her teeth, claws sliding out from the tips of her webbed fingers. With a growl, her scales shift again, revealing her true form, her lithe body covered in brown and white scales in a striped pattern. “And you killed *her*.”

Dorian sways briefly on his feet. “No. No, you’re dead.”

Zara creeps closer, one slow step at a time. My eyes flick to the belt she wears around her hips, one that holds a sheathed dagger. Since this is her true form, I assume the weapon is real and not a glamour. I pull Dorian away from the wardrobe, guiding him to the wall to give us more space. His steps are slow and clunky, his skin a shade paler. He seems like he might be in shock. I can’t imagine it’s easy seeing what looks like the ghost of the fae he killed.

“You murdered my sister,” Zara hisses. “I was supposed to kill you in divine retribution. You weren’t supposed to survive that shipwreck, human. I was supposed to drag you to the depths of the sea before I revealed to you my true form, reminded you why you deserve to die. I didn’t get the chance that time, so I won’t waste much now. I relish the fear in your eyes. If only it never had to end.”

Dorian says nothing, but his shoulders start to sag.

“Leave him alone, Zara,” I say, burning her with a glare. “Dorian doesn’t deserve to die. Nimue was wrong about him. *You’re* wrong about him.”

She snarls and turns her gaze to me. “Oh, how I wish I could get away with killing you. Your mother would never forgive me. And yet…I doubt she could begrudge me a taste.” With that, she opens her jaw wide, revealing sharp teeth as she charges for me. Just as she’s about to close in, Dorian snaps into action as if coming out of a daze. He angles his body toward her and slams the full weight of his arm into her gut. As she stumbles back, he kicks her legs out from under her and sends an elbow to her chest. She strikes the ground hard but is only down for a single breath. With a hiss, she scrambles to her feet. Before she can take a single step, he thrusts her against the wall. He shoves his forearm under her chin, pinning her by the throat.

Relief floods me but it’s short lived. That’s when I notice the glint of a sea glass blade pressed to Dorian’s neck.

Dorian must feel the knife at his throat, for he freezes.

Zara’s lips flick up. “I could open your throat right now if I wanted,” she says, voice strained. “But your death lies at the bottom of the sea. Your soul a gift to the ocean in payment for the one you stole.”

He presses harder against her neck, but she does the same with the blade. My heart twists as a rivulet of crimson runs down to his black collar.

“If I must end your life here, I will,” she says. “I can cut you faster than you can choke me. You know I can. Besides, there’s something I want from Maisie first.”

“Leave her out of this,” he growls, pressing her throat again and receiving a deepening gash in return.

Panic has my heart feeling like it will explode. “Stop! Please!”

“I’ll let him go,” Zara chokes out. “I promise.” What she says can’t be a lie, since she’s in her normal form. She can only lie when she’s mimicking someone else, and only for the sake of the act.

I frantically nod. “Then do it already!”

She makes no move. “I promise to let Dorian go. I’ll even release my dagger to the floor. But only if you do one thing for me.”

“What?”

Her lips pull into a wide, toothy smile. “Tell Dorian why you came here. Tell him about your little bargain.”

Tremors rack my body, and any possible response is burned away as Dorian slowly slides his gaze to mine. That's all the distraction Zara needs. She lunges off the wall, thrusts her blade—

"I promise!" The words erupt from my throat in a shout. "I promise. I do. I'll tell him right now. Just let him go."

Zara lifts her chin. As agreed, she lowers her dagger and drops it to the floor.

Dorian looks from Zara to me, as if debating whether to take his opportunity to end her now that he has the upper hand.

"Attack me again and the deal is off," Zara says. "But believe me. You're going to want to hear this."

He furrows his brow and takes a step back, shoulders tense.

I hug my arms to my chest.

And tell the truth.

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The truth is a cold thing. The room is sapped of warmth, eradicating the heat that once stood between me and Dorian, like it was never there at all. Now all I see is his icy stare, feel his chilling whisper. “You were sent here to kill me,” he says.

“Yes.” My voice breaks, the single syllable like an iron thorn twisting inside my heart.

His expression shifts, lashed with pain. “To *kill* me.”

“Yes.”

“How were you planning to do it?” he asks, chest rising and falling in rapid rhythm.

I bite my lip, knowing what I say next will hurt him even more. “I was supposed to kiss you.”

“Kiss me?”

“My kiss…is lethal.”

He takes a step back and runs a hand over his face, but it doesn’t wipe away the agonized look in his eyes. “Our first date in the parlor, when you leaned in to kiss me…that was you trying to end my life.”

“I regret it,” I say, my voice warbling. “Everything inside me burns with regret.”

“You didn’t stop there, though, did you? Every time we were alone together, you were just trying to get close enough to murder me. And here I was, a total fool, thinking you wanted to kiss me for pleasure, not death. Thinking I wanted to kiss you.” He pauses, brows knitting together as he

studies me. Not with that intent desiring gaze I've grown to love, but one full of terror. Disgust. "Nothing that I thought was between us was real."

I take a step forward, my hands desperate to reach for him, but I'm too ashamed to touch him. Too certain he'll push me away. "That's not true. It was real, and that's why I made you eliminate me from the competition tonight. Because I realized I can't do it."

"When did you realize it?" His tone sharpens. "How long have you *not* been trying to kill me?"

My stomach turns as I deliver the truth. "Since last night."

He lets out a dark laugh and shakes his head. "Since last night, but every moment before that…"

I step closer again. My only consolation is that he doesn't retreat. Instead, he stands tall, eyes narrowed as he holds my gaze. "I had no choice, Dorian. I was manipulated into a bargain with my mother—a woman I despise. She's the reason I've been living in Lumenas, hiding, thieving. I've been trying to evade her for over a year. When I rescued you…she found me. She wanted to punish me for foiling the attempt on your life. She cursed me to die unless I obeyed her, gave me ten days to reverse the fate she placed upon me."

His expression flickers at my mention of the curse, but he quickly steels it behind his icy mask.

"She convinced me you were a monster," I say. "That I was doing the right thing by entering our bargain."

"You were told I was a monster and you believed her without a second thought."

"At first, I did believe her, but the more I got to know you, the more I doubted myself. Why do you think I asked you for the truth? Why do you think I've evaded every potential kiss since my first attempt?"

"Yes, you evaded my kisses last night," he says through his teeth, "but that's long after you already accepted a bargain to end my life. If I hadn't pushed you away the first time…" His expression pales, eyes growing unfocused. "I'd be dead."

Tears pool in my eyes, and my chest tightens more and more with every breath. "I'm glad you pushed me away. I'm glad I failed my mission. In fact, I'm glad I was the one sent here to do it."

His eyes fly back to mine, wide with terror.

“Only because if it hadn’t been me, it would have been someone else.” I point at Zara, who watches us with a smug grin. “It would have been her. And anyone else would have succeeded by now. The Alpha Council sanctioned your assassination, Dorian. They wanted to stop you from gaining citizenship.”

“And I’m supposed to thank you for that?”

“That’s not—”

A bark of laughter cuts off my words. “You’re wrong, little seal.” Zara crosses her arms and leans against the wall.

“About what?” I ask.

“The Alpha Council never sanctioned Dorian’s assassination.

“Nimue said they did.”

“No, she suggested it.” Zara chuckles. “You’re so stupid, Maisie. Just a pitiful pup, gullible enough to swallow deception that’s been fed to you by a woman you profess to hate. In truth, Dorian is welcome on the isle. He’s safe. He doesn’t need a wife or to hide behind religious sanctuary.”

The blood rushes through my ears, filling my head with a pounding pressure. “The Alpha Council never approved of Dorian’s death? My father didn’t either?”

“No. According to Nimue, your father was one of Dorian’s strongest defenders when word of his impending arrival reached the council.”

“She…she tricked me.”

Her grin widens. “Are you even surprised?”

“The attack on his ship…”

“Was personal, not professional. I requested the kill, and Nimue approved. It was supposed to be quick. Easy. No survivors. Then *he* attacked me with fire.” She snaps her teeth at Dorian, a growl in her throat. He sneers back, fists clenched, posture poised for attack. She turns her gaze back to me. “And you saved his life, ruining everything. I was supposed to be the one to end him. His life was mine to gift to the sea. Then your mother discovered you were involved because I so stupidly gave her that shell comb.”

She glowers at the side of my head where the comb resides, and I resist the urge to touch it. Instead, I picture its row of teeth and try to determine how much damage they could do if I get close enough to Zara. I’m no fighter. What are the chances I can do anything to overpower her? Then my gaze snags on the discarded sea glass dagger that remains on the floor. Zara

has made no move to retrieve it. But the way she stalks closer, step by step, shows she's preparing to attack again. She may have promised to let Dorian go, but she never said she wouldn't try to hurt him after.

I can't let that happen. Dorian may hate me, but I can live with that. As short as my life is likely to be.

Zara's eyes dart between me and Dorian, and she steps closer again. Her hand lowers to the belt at her waist, as if she's forgotten her sheath is empty. But it isn't the missing dagger she reaches for. It's a small pouch on the side. She flicks it open and retrieves something flat and silver—an object I recognize. It's Nimue's Chariot, the device that allows someone to transport themselves from one place to another in an instant.

As Zara draws closer, her eyes leave me entirely and focus only on Dorian. She got what she wanted out of me—to inflict pain on Dorian—and no longer sees me as a threat. He watches her back with a calculated gaze, stepping back when she steps forward, shifting sideways when she tries to sidestep them. Soon they begin to circle each other like sharks. With slow, quiet movements, I back toward the wall. When my foot brushes the side of the dagger, I start inching down.

Zara and Dorian pay me no heed.

"It's time for you to pay for murdering my sister," Zara says. "It's time for your body to feed the sea, for your blood to be tasted by the waters my sister belonged to."

Dorian says nothing, but his expression flashes with something like remorse. I can almost see the guilt written over his face.

Zara must see it too, but to her, it must look like weakness. She takes her chance and lunges for him, clawed fingers swiping across his chest. He leaps back, but her fingertips make contact, opening the front of his jacket in long, crossways gashes. I don't wait to see if blood wells between the rips. I crouch the rest of the way down, wrapping my fingers around the dagger hilt. Zara darts for Dorian again. He evades the next swipe, and I take my chance to charge at her back. Just as the sea glass tip of the blade closes in at the back of her neck, she whirls around and knocks my hand to the side with the fist she keeps closed around the Chariot. The dagger clatters to the floor. With her other hand, she swipes her claws at me. I feel pain lash my shoulder, but it's cut short. Zara lurches back as Dorian hooks an arm around her waist. She turns her attack on Dorian, slicing a claw at his wounded neck. I hear him bite back a cry. My heart leaps into my throat

as I see her clawed fingers latch into his shoulder, digging through his jacket into the flesh below. I scramble toward the blade again, but just as I'm about to reach it, a bright light obscures my vision. Squinting over my shoulder, I see Zara has opened the compact.

She's about to use the Chariot.

And she still has her claws in Dorian.

I remember how Zara grabbed my arm before she kidnapped me with the device, and how Nimue made me hold onto her when she returned me to Cape Vega. The Chariot requires physical contact to transport another person.

I know exactly where she plans to take him.

Half blind, my fingers grapple against the floor as I seek the dagger. A sharp pain lashes my finger, and I've never been so grateful for a wound. Because it tells me I've found the blade. I feel along the sea glass until I reach the hilt, then grip it tight in my hand. Whirling toward the source of the ever-growing light, I run for the hazy shape of Zara. A sharp rap sounds behind me, like claws scraping glass. Then comes the sound of my name. I don't need to look to know it's Podaxis at the window.

Good.

He's witnessed the attack.

He can take care of Dorian.

I run the rest of the way to Zara, feeling for scales. She tries to fling me away, but I sink the blade into her scaly flesh. With a grunt, she surges backward and I wrap my arms around her.

The next thing I know, water fills my lungs.

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The light of the Chariot goes out, leaving me blinking into dark seawater. Zara's face is a mask of rage before me. I look around but there's no sign of Dorian.

My plan must have worked then. My attack forced her to release her hold on him. Instead, she transported me to his watery grave.

She wraps a hand around my throat and I feel claws sink into my neck. I scramble to find the hilt of the dagger, but my hands come up empty. My vision darkens at the edges, and part of me wants to give in. To stop fighting. Stop trying to hold my breath and combat the water that threatens to drown me. But my battle isn't over. I remember what Nimue said about the Chariot. It can only be used twice before it must be charged by starlight. Assuming Zara hasn't already used it today, it still has one more use. She can transport herself back to the room and end Dorian there.

My lungs burn as I shove my hand in Zara's face. With the other, I reach for the side of my head, finding my shell comb tangled at the ends of my hair. I tear it free. With all my waning strength, I rake the teeth down Zara's forearm, from her inner elbow to her wrist. Not the one that ends in a hand wrapped around my neck. The one holding the Chariot. With a hiss, she shoves me hard in the chest, making me gasp out the remainder of my air. I don't see Zara anymore as I remain suspended alone in the water, my mind reeling as I try to recall how to swim in this form. I kick my legs, but my skirts are too heavy, their weight dragging me down. Down.

I tighten my fingers into fists, but they're too numb to feel what they hold. If they hold anything at all anymore.

My vision darkens further. Almost black now. Still, I kick. Kick again. Struggle futilely against my skirts. Then I rail at a pair of arms that encircle my waist, their grip hard and punishing. But they don't drag me to my death.

Instead, they pull me to air.

My head breaches the surface and I take in gasping breaths of it. My throat burns as I cough up water. The arms continue to wrap around me, tugging me, and I'm too weak to fight them, too weak to do anything but allow my rescuer to swim me to shore.

I feel my feet meet rocks, but I can't gain purchase. The arms continue to drag me on. Once we're free of the water, those same arms shove me away, sending me sprawling onto my knees. I collapse on my side and see Zara marching toward me, a dark silhouette beneath the night sky. Every muscle screams in protest as I scramble away. I try to rise to my feet, but my legs won't obey. They're too numb. I push back as far as I can and settle onto my knees, my hands tucked into the folds of my sodden skirt, seeking some semblance of warmth. Zara pursues me. As she draws near, the moonlight illuminates her face, the rage in her eyes. Behind her, I see the hulking black shape of a familiar bluff. We're at Cape Vega.

Hands on her hips, she stops just before me, lips curled in a snarl. "I wish I could kill you!" she shouts. "I wish I could just let you die!"

I frown. My lips try to form words, but my teeth chatter too hard. This is worse than when I rescued Dorian. But—same as then—I know I'll recover. Even without my sealskin, I'm a selkie. A creature of the sea. Water is my element. It may be able to drown me, but it can give me strength too. Not that I feel anything close to strong right now. Finally, I manage to move my lips. "Why…don't you…then?"

"Nimue would never forgive me for killing you," she mutters. Her glare is sharp enough to cut. Blood drips down the scales on her forearm, revealing the depth of the wound I inflicted there. Unfortunately, she too is a creature of the sea. Water strengthens her. Already, there's no sign of where I stabbed her before she transported me with the Chariot. "Stealing your kill, she will forgive. But taking your life? Not her precious little daughter."

"That's why you saved me just now?" I say, my voice raspy. "You think I actually matter to her?"

She rolls her eyes. “You do matter, although I can’t fathom why. She chose you over me. Dorian was supposed to be *my* revenge, but she wanted to use his failed assassination as an opportunity to claim you. To be the mother she’s always wanted to be.”

“She’s no mother to me.”

“She wants to be. You’re her pride and joy.”

I let out a humorless laugh. “She cursed me to die.”

“You’re not going to die, you idiot.”

I open my mouth, but I don’t know what to say to that. Could Nimue have been lying? She deceived me about the Alpha Council sanctioning Dorian’s death, but I’m certain she outright stated my curse.

“Nimue may have cursed you, but she’ll revoke it in the nick of time regardless of the outcome of your mission. She said as much to the Sisters when she returned from bringing you here. She has every intention of offering you one more chance to save your life. Join the Sisters, and she’ll end your curse. That’s why I feel no guilt about stealing your kill. Nor do I fear her retribution. So long as her precious daughter remains alive and of sound-enough mind to bargain for her life, Nimue will forgive me. In the end, all that matters is that you join the Sisters.”

“She knew all along that I’d fail.”

“No, she hoped you’d succeed. She’d most certainly prefer if you did, for that would have shattered your pathetic little soul, assured you’d have no other option but to become a Sister.”

“That doesn't make sense,” I say, trying to reconcile her words with the ones Nimue spoke. “Our bargain was supposed to free me from the Sisters and from my dark magic. She enchanted my lips so that my magic would dissolve with my next kiss, wove those very terms into our bargain. If I’d succeeded, she’d have no use for me because my magic would be gone. I’d have no impressive means to kill, no assets as an assassin.”

“I almost wish you’d succeeded. It might have been worth losing my chance to kill Dorian just to see the look in your eyes when you learned the truth.”

My blood runs cold. “What truth?”

“First of all, you would have been crushed once Nimue revealed Dorian’s assassination hadn’t been sanctioned. You’d have killed him thinking your dear father approved, that the entire Alpha Council supported your actions. When you learned the truth, you’d have realized just how

disappointed dear daddy would be. He'd be disgusted with you. You'd have no one to turn to but Nimue. No one to rely on to keep your dirty secret but the mother you despise."

Nausea turns my stomach. She's right. Even if I'd never grown to have feelings for Dorian, killing him would have devastated me in more ways than one. Especially if I'd gone through with it and found out I hadn't been following Father's wishes after all. Worse, Father would have been crushed. Mortified. And maybe she's right. Maybe he'd even be repulsed by me.

I can't see you made a murderer.

Rage boils in my heart. Nimue knew exactly what to do to ensure I'd be isolated, fully dependent on her, regardless of whether I finished or failed my mission. But there's still something that doesn't add up. "How was she planning to utilize me as an assassin once she removed my deadly magic?"

Zara snickers. "Naive little seal. She never said she'd *remove* your magic, only make it so you never had to kill with your kiss again. Emphasis on the *had to*. The truth being…you still *could*."

"What are you saying?"

"When you killed me, Nimue studied the essence of your magic. She discovered only anger makes you kill when you kiss. A kiss given in love would have done nothing."

Luther immediately comes to mind. I remember the searing hate that flooded me when I realized he was stealing my sealskin. All this time, I thought my kiss had killed him. In truth, my lips only turned lethal when paired with rage.

Hope and regret go to war within me. My kiss…isn't deadly. I could have kissed Dorian a thousand times over. So long as the kiss was given in love, it never would have hurt him.

My thoughts must be written over my face, for Zara says, "Don't give in to that little spark of relief so soon, selkie. For your next kiss will kill, no matter what you feel, because Nimue has cursed it to be so. That's what she was really doing when she altered your magic."

The tingling sensation in my lips burns to a painful degree. All this time, I thought that feeling was a sign that my magic was preparing to dissolve. I think back to what she said, what she promised.

I can make it so you never again have to fear your own kiss. I can enchant your lips so that your next kiss is the last that results in senseless,

automatic death. From then on, you can kiss with love, with passion, with joy, and never harm a soul.

Tremors take over my body. If I didn't already hate Nimue, I do now. She manipulated me in every way. Her words were true. She *could* make it so I never had to fear my kiss. All she'd have to do is reveal the truth she'd gleaned about my magic—a truth I hadn't a clue about. Furthermore, she made it so my next kiss *is* the last that results in automatic death…because, unknown to me, death had never been a guaranteed result in the first place. I only thought it was. I interpreted our bargain to mean she'd dissolve my lethal power. All she did was make it more dangerous. Twisted it. She lied without lying.

Just like I so often do.

My heart clenches at that. Maybe Nimue is right. Maybe I have inherited certain things from her. I've lied. Manipulated. Nearly killed an innocent man. A man I…I had feelings for.

But this is where it ends.

Water continues to drip down my face, my arms, my clothes, but it no longer chills me. Instead, I let it feel like a caress. A hug. Strength. My fingers thaw, and I flex them beneath the folds of my skirt. "What happens now?" I ask. "If you can't kill me, then what do you plan to do?"

Her expression turns cruel. "You have something I need."

I tighten my fist, feeling the circular compact in my palm. After I raked my comb over her arm, she released the device. I snatched it then, but only now do I know I've managed to keep hold of it.

She takes a step closer. "I may not be able to kill you, but I will fight you, maim you. That device could send me straight back to your room, or any room in the church that I've been inside before."

I know she speaks the truth. Nimue told me the device can only be used to travel to a place one has been before, one the user can see clearly in their mind's eye. Zara has been at the church since last night. There are numerous places she can show up, numerous faces she can wear to get close to Dorian again.

"No matter what," she says through her teeth, "I'm getting back to Dorian. I'll walk if I must, wear every disguise I can think of to get inside that church. I'll even kill him where he stands instead of gifting his body to the sea. Either way, I can't let you keep that."

Keeping my palm closed, I place my fist in my lap. Only the merest flash of silver shows between my fingers. “What will you do for me if I give it to you?”

She scoffs. “You’re not in a position to bargain with me. You’re weak. Pathetic. I could bite off your fingers one by one and you’d have nothing to fight me with.”

“I was clever enough to take it. Don’t I deserve something for that?”

“Clever? Hardly.”

It takes all my restraint not to glare at her. “I wouldn’t write me off so soon. If what you’re saying is true, Nimue will soon make me one of your Sisters. That means, if she loves me as much as you claim, I could make things hard for you in the future. I think that puts me in a fine place to bargain.”

Her eyes darken but she says nothing.

“How about this?” I lift my fist ever so slightly. “I’ll hand this over without a fight, if you promise to kill Brother Dorian within five minutes of arriving at your next destination.”

She tilts her head back. “What kind of bargain is that?”

“A challenge,” I say, a corner of my lips curling up. “A dare.”

“Are you suggesting that lovelorn act was exactly that? An act?” She huffs a laugh. “I think not.”

“My feelings or lack thereof are none of your business. What matters to you is I don’t think you can do it.”

Her lips curl with indignation. “Even if I travel back to the same room we just left and find it empty, I can carve through every man that stands in my way of finding him. He was wounded. He can’t have gone far.”

I shrug. “Do you honestly think you can fight the men of Saint Lazaro? The church has a history of violence against the fae.”

“The church is soft. They’re nothing but a shadow of the men who rebelled against our kind. They will break beneath me. I wouldn’t even need a weapon to kill every man in that church. I could kill them all before they know I’m there.”

“Prove it. Show me what the Sisters of the Black Eel are made of. If you succeed, I’ll ask Nimue to go easy on you for stealing my kill. Otherwise, you can fight me for this. Maybe you’ll get it back and finish what you started. Or maybe you’ll find I’m made of more ferocity than you know.

Maybe my lips will find yours. This time, Nimue won't be here to bring you back."

She curls and uncurls her clawed fists. Silence stretches between us as she studies my face, weighs her odds against my dare. Finally, she lifts her chin. "I agree to this bargain."

I raise my fist out to her and give her what's inside.

Her lips peel back, a hiss escaping her teeth as she stares down at my shell comb.

Silver inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

Silver she mistook for the Chariot.

Silver that absorbed her attention, making her ignore the hand that had been hidden in the folds of my skirt. The hand that flipped open the Chariot seconds ago, its face pressed to the ground, its light smothered. Only now does its illumination grow bright enough to be seen through the layers of damp fabric.

Zara's eyes go wide.

I lunge forward, wrapping my arms around her leg and sending her sprawling.

In my mind's eye, I form a vision of thick metal walls, sealed by a heavy door.

The light swallows us whole.

When it goes out, I find us in darkness. Or close to it. Damp rot invades my senses. Zara kicks me away and I release her leg. She looks wildly around, but walls close in on every side, the single door sealed with only a tiny, barred window for light. There's nowhere else to go.

"Where are we?" she roars.

I rise to my feet, finding my legs solid beneath me. "The Lumenas City Jail. I was locked up in this very cell once before."

"Why did you bring me here?"

"It's a ten-minute walk from Saint Lazaro. If you ran you could make it. But only if you were on the other side of that door. Trust me, you won't be getting out of here. You can shift forms, change your face, it won't matter. This cell was designed to hold fae. The officers will pay no mind to your screams."

Realization dawns in her eyes, but she seems unable to accept it. "Our bargain is null. You didn't give me the Chariot."

“I said I’d give you what I held in my hand, and I did. I gave you my comb. You agreed to kill Dorian within five minutes of arriving at your next destination. We’re here now. And we both know what happens when someone of full-fae blood fails to fulfill a bargain.”

Even without a curse like the one Nimue placed on me, a broken bargain means excruciating pain for a fae. Pain that eventually ends in death unless the other party revokes the bargain.

I know what my choice will be. Zara’s fixation on revenge makes her Dorian’s lifelong enemy. Which makes her mine as well.

She throws her head back in laughter. “You idiot. You may have condemned me to die, but in doing so you condemn yourself. If I won’t be making it out of here alive, then I no longer need to obey Nimue’s wishes. Five minutes is more than enough time to kill you.”

With a roar, she leaps for me.

But her claws never make contact.

Instead, she freezes, her body and the walls around us now a shimmering, pulsating violet.

“Goodbye, Zara,” I say, my voice hollow in the Twelfth Court.

Then through the wall, I disappear.

40

It's a gamble to assume Zara can't enter the Twelfth Court like I can. From what I know of fae magic, it's a rare ability, one I now understand I inherited from my mother. A power I still hardly comprehend. The only renowned fae in history known to walk through the Twelfth Court like this is Queen Evelyn of the Fire Court. And she is said to have been blessed by the All of All, chosen to end the last war with the humans. Even so, I remain outside Zara's cell for minutes on end, long enough to ensure she makes no miraculous escape. Long enough to hear her shouts turn to pleas. Her pleas turn to cries. Her cries turn to agonized wails.

Only then do I enter the Twelfth Court again and sneak out of the jail altogether.

Still soaking wet, I ignore the strange looks I get from passersby as I make my way from Halley Street to the church. Once there, I pause on the sidewalk.

Now that I'm here, I don't know what compelled me to come. I can't show my face inside. Can't risk even sneaking in through the Twelfth Court. I'm desperate to know how Dorian fared after I left, and I'm sure Podaxis is worried sick. But I doubt Dorian has kept quiet about my guilt. The entire church probably knows I'm an assassin by now. There could be a warrant for my arrest circling the city already.

I smooth my matted, damp hair over my eyes, but I doubt it does much good. People know who I am. They've seen me in the papers, at the Blessing Ceremonies. At least the night is dark and Salvation Street is relatively empty this late in the evening. On quick feet, I scurry around the

corner, casting only a brief glance down the alley for any sign of Podaxis. Seeing none, I pick up my pace—and nearly smack into a towering figure. An unfamiliar man steps before me as if out of the alley's shadows. How had I not seen him? I lurch back, glimpsing a painfully handsome face, a well-tailored suit, and a frock coat. He wears a top hat that makes it hard to ascertain if he has pointed ears. Whether human or fae, he looks like a true gentleman, someone who belongs East of Third Avenue. But there's something dangerous in his bearing, his height, his silence.

Panic surges, making my pulse kick up. I fear Zara somehow escaped her cell, survived the pain of our broken bargain. I take another step back, my fingers fumbling for a weapon, but my shell comb is gone. Only the Chariot remains, and its two uses are up for the day.

"You're Princess Maisie," comes the man's deep voice. It isn't a question, but I refuse to confirm the answer. He seems unperturbed by my obvious wariness of him. "Your father sent me to relay a covert message."

Mention of my father has my heart pounding, but I bristle with suspicion. "How do you know my father?"

"I know many and many know me. Especially the royals. They call me the Huntsman. I have a knack for finding people."

I want to say finding me couldn't have been a challenge, considering I've been in the papers all week, but I keep my lips pursed tight.

"King Ronan got wind of rumors that you were here and participating in a bridal competition. He wanted me to confirm if the rumors were true or if you were being impersonated by someone seeking fame and fortune."

I cross my arms. "You think I'm her?"

"Yes."

"Then what's the message?"

"It's more of a correspondence." He shifts his jaw side to side as if talking with me is growing tedious. "It begins with a question. Did she find you?"

I consider keeping my mouth shut, but if this man truly was sent by my father…

With a deep breath, I say, "She did."

"Are you hers now?"

I know what the question is really asking—has she made me an assassin. My heart clenches as doubt plagues me. Was Nimue right when she suggested my father didn't want me if I proved to have magic like hers?

How would he feel knowing what I just did to Zara? Killing her was no accident, no product of misinformation or manipulation. It was premeditated. Calculated. Will he see me as a monster now? Does he only love me so long as I remain a good little seal?

I don't know the answer. I still don't understand why he omitted his involvement in the bargain he made with Nimue. It could have been from shame over what he did…or shame of me. If I've learned anything the past couple of weeks, it's that the truth is complicated and relationships are more so. Whatever the case, I love my father and I know he's only wanted the best for me.

"No." I lift my chin. My next words come out with conviction. "She tried, but she will not have me."

"Good. I will—"

"Can you give him a message from me in return?"

His jaw shifts again. "I'm not a message boy. This is beneath me as it is. It's more a matter of convenience and being in the area that I agreed to do this favor for Ronan."

"Please," I whisper.

"Fine," he grinds out. "Make it fast. I've got other murderous girls to find."

I flinch at how he says the last part, implying that he knows about my magic. Or my mission. Who is this mysterious Huntsman? I shake the question from my mind. "Tell him I love him. With all my heart. And please advocate for Dorian Ariko in securing his safety and citizenship in Faerwyvae. Ensure his sisters are cared for."

"Very well." He nods and takes a step back, but another thought strikes me.

I thrust out my fist. "If you can, see that this is given to him for safekeeping. It belongs to the Alpha Council and shouldn't fall into the wrong hands."

As soon as he takes the Chariot from me, I wonder whether giving it to him was the smartest move. This Huntsman may know my father, but that doesn't guarantee he's trustworthy. Still, I can't risk Nimue getting the device back. If I keep it, there's a chance she'll find it. It's too powerful an object for someone like her to have.

Without another word, the Huntsman pockets the Chariot, tips his hat, and walks away.

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I find Podaxis at the Vulture's Prose. He and Nadia race toward me as soon as I step foot inside the front door.

Mr. Tuttle follows just behind, releasing a sigh. "Oh, thank the stars."

Klaus and Stanley emerge from backstage, faces relieved. Thankfully, there's no Martin. I haven't thought of him much since what happened at Club Scorpius, but I'll be content to never see him again.

"Podaxis just got here and told us about the attack," Nadia says and wraps her arms around me. I go limp in her embrace, trying not to cry at the sincerity of her affection. I feel Klaus and Stanley pat my shoulders.

Once Nadia releases me, I turn toward Podaxis. "Is Dorian…"

"He's fine," says my friend. "He's in the infirmary. His wounds appeared mild."

"And Vanessa?"

"Found bound and gagged in her wardrobe. She's in the infirmary too."

My mind fills with imaginings of Dorian and Vanessa, two souls injured by the same foe, their hospital beds side by side in the infirmary. The vision makes my chest squeeze.

"Let's get you cleaned up so you can head back," Mr. Tuttle says, pulling me from my thoughts. "I'll run a bath."

"I'll pick out fresh clothes," Nadia adds.

I stare blankly at them. "Go back?"

"To the church," Mr. Tuttle says.

"There's still time to win your dear prince's heart," Klaus says with a wink.

I shake my head. "For one, he's no prince. For another, there's nothing to win. I was eliminated from the competition right before the attack."

The faces around me fall, which tells me Podaxis must have given only the barest of details.

Nadia squeezes my arm. "I'm so sorry, hun."

"It's…" I try to say it's fine, but the words dry up in my throat. Tears glaze my eyes.

Nadia frowns and pulls me in for another hug. I feel other arms surround me—Stanley, Klaus, Mr. Tuttle. Arms of those I've never let myself get too close to, never let myself be a true friend to. And here they are, comforting me in my time of need.

I feel Podaxis' pincers tap my ankle in his version of a consoling gesture, and that's all it takes to break me. A sob bursts from my lips, and the arms hug me tighter.

Enveloped in the comfort of my friends, I grieve.

THE NEXT TWO DAYS, I KEEP MOSTLY TO MY ROOM. THE THEATER'S residents visit me between shows and rehearsals. Muffled music and bellowing voices reach me through the walls during performances. Normally, I'm out stealing while the theater is busy. But today…

Thankfully, Mr. Tuttle gives no word of reproach. Instead, he comes to visit every so often to ask if there's anything he can do for me. Eventually, I accept his offer to run a bath. Something that perhaps benefits the others as much as me. His and the others' care for me warms my heart, and yet I can't help feeling unworthy of their attention. To them, I seem like a heartbroken girl. I am, of course, but I brought that heartache upon myself. I entered a bargain to kill a man only to discover I'd made the wrong choice. Sure, I agreed to the bargain to save my life, but it never should have been my life or his—or anyone's. I should have been strong enough to stand for what's right. The way my father raised me to do.

Instead, I let myself be manipulated by Nimue.

I know my friends would understand if I told them the truth of everything. I'm just not ready to talk about it yet.

Well, at least not to anyone but Podaxis. Unlike the others, he won't take my silence as a hint not to pry. I can't be mad at him though. My fate remains unknown, my curse set to claim me at sunrise tomorrow. Every moment together could be our last.

"What will you do, Maisie?" he asks for what feels like the thousandth time. He paces along the foot of my bed while I remain curled under the blankets. I've been like this most of the day. It's as close as I can get to the comfort of my sealskin. One I might never get to feel again.

"I've already told you everything," I say.

"What if Zara was wrong? What if Nimue won't revoke your bargain and end your curse?"

I sigh. “I believe Zara when she said Nimue did all of this to get me to join the Sisters. Whether or not I believe my mother did everything out of love, I do know she wants me alive. She wants me to be *hers*.”

“Will you join the Sisters of the Black Eel?” When I don’t answer, he adds, “Promise me you will. Promise me you will do anything to save your life.”

I pat his mushroomed carapace until he stops his pacing. “I will do what I must.”

“That’s not the answer I was looking for.”

I roll my eyes as if the subject isn’t as dire as it is. “Enough about death and curses. Let’s talk about you.” I sit up in bed and push back the covers. Without any reason to dress up, I’m back to wearing trousers and a men’s shirt. “Particularly about you and Nadia. Have you confessed your feelings yet?”

“I’ve hardly had the time. You know, with all this death and curses business. It hasn’t been proper.”

“I don’t care if it’s proper,” I say. “I think you should do it. Tonight. Now.”

He grimaces. “Oh, I don’t know. Tomorrow maybe.”

“What are you waiting for?”

Shrinking down, he clacks his pincers together. “I’m frightened.”

“Of what?”

“I…I’ll have to shift forms.”

I’d argue that he doesn’t *have* to, but I do think it would be best. I can’t imagine there being much room for growth in their relationship if he remains a crustacean the entire time. “Why are you afraid to shift?”

“I could be very ugly.”

“You won’t be.”

“She might think I am.”

I scratch him under the chin. “If so, then she doesn’t deserve you.”

He releases a heavy sigh. “Bad things could happen.”

“Like what?”

He remains quiet for a few moments, hesitating. Finally, he says, “My kind don’t shift often. Very rarely do fungus sprites take humanoid form. But my parents…” His beady eyes grow haunted.

My heart sinks with dread.

“They shifted regularly and enjoyed their seelie bodies. I was still very young when it happened, but I remember the shark attack. They were swimming in seelie form. All I saw was teeth and blood. The shark never saw me, though. I was left alone.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me this?”

“It’s not a memory I liked to relive. Besides, as I grew older, I realized the fear was unfounded. Seelie form doesn’t always equate to bad things happening. Accidents can occur to anyone.”

“You still should have told me.”

He shrugs. “Now it seems we’ve both landed on subjects neither of us want to talk about.”

I give him a sad smile.

“We should get dinner,” he says. “Let’s get out of the theater for a while, breathe fresh air.”

My stomach plummets. There’s a reason I’ve stayed in my room all day, and I intend to do the same until well after midnight. I want to avoid any chance that I could hear word from Salvation Street, the spread of rumors that Brother Dorian has selected his beautiful bride. Tonight is the last night of the competition. I made the mistake of venturing outdoors earlier this morning only to overhear strains of conversation that included the words *Brother Dorian* and *Blessing Ceremony*. That’s all it took to send me darting back to the theater. I don’t want to know who was sent home last night. It doesn’t matter. There’s no doubt about who he’ll choose.

For a while, I stupidly thought Dorian might cancel the competition. He heard what Zara said about him being welcome on the isle. He doesn’t need a bride or religious sanctuary. He’s free to apply for citizenship, and the Alpha Council is prepared to grant it. Well, aside from Nimue.

Then again, he made a promise to Father Viktor. Took vows as a brother of Saint Lazaro. As wary as he may have been to join their ranks, I know he feels beholden to the church now. They saved his sisters from the workhouse. They secured the girls’ place as his heirs.

Dorian will do the honorable thing.

He’ll finish the pageant and marry Vanessa.

And I will do my best to harbor no resentment as I meet my fate at sunrise.

Podaxis lets out a grumbling sigh. “You’re really going to shut yourself in here all night?”

I nod.

"Then at least let me bring you some food."

I haven't had much of an appetite, but if it gets Podaxis to stop pacing and staring at me for a short time, then I suppose I can humor him. "Sure. See if Nadia wants anything too. Maybe the two of you can go together."

He brightens at that and tries to sound nonchalant as he says, "Oh, all right."

After he leaves, I slump back in bed, enjoying the aching solitude. Being alone conjures far too many thoughts in my mind. Good and bad. Memories of the past and fears over my future.

I know what I must do tomorrow, but—

A knock sounds at my door. It isn't Podaxis, for he would leap for the handle and turn it himself. I wait for whoever is on the other side to either announce themselves or leave, but the knock sounds again. With a frown, I slip from my bed and stride across the tiny bedroom to my door. My breath catches in my throat as I open it to reveal the last face I thought I'd see on the other side.

Dorian.

41

My heart does a flip in my chest as I stare at the man before me. Dorian is dressed the same as he was when I took him to the boxing match—dark trousers, shirtsleeves, and cap—which makes me question if his presence is all in my head. Surely, he wouldn't really be here.

I shutter my eyes a few times, but the vision doesn't disappear. Nor does it move. Dorian's gaze is locked on mine, his face as cold and expressionless as it was the day the bridal competition began. My chest feels tight. If I were to dream about him, why couldn't I have conjured the smiling version?

Because that would hurt even more.

I put a hand to my forehead. "I'm asleep, aren't I?"

Dorian's face finally flickers. Just a twitch of his mouth, his brow. Then his eyes leave mine to trail down the length of my body and back again. "Is this what you wear to bed?" His voice is soft, tentative.

I glance down at myself, studying my loose trousers, my shirt left unbuttoned several inches below my collarbone. That's when I notice something else. When I dress in men's clothing, I wear no corset, but I normally at least wear a waistcoat or jacket in public. Since I'm home in bed, there's no reason to don anything else. Which leaves a less-than-subtle hint of my swells and crests.

A blush heats my cheeks, and I bring my eyes back to Dorian's. I find a flicker of amusement in his dark irises, the ghost of a smile tugging his lips. Then I notice the strip of cloth peeking up from under his shirt collar—a

bandage to cover the wound Zara inflicted on his throat. “You’re really here,” I whisper.

Instead of answering, he holds out a paper bag. I take it from him. The aroma of fried dough, Starcane sugar, cinnamon, and cardamom infuse the air before I even open the bag. When I look inside, I find four round Lumies.

“What’s this for?”

He sighs before speaking. “A peace offering.”

Tears spring to my eyes. His words and actions reflect mine the morning I caught him training. Was it truly less than a week ago? It feels like an eternity since then. My throat tightens, and it’s only made worse when his expression softens, his eyes shifting from hard to pleading.

“I hope you don’t think too badly of me.” Another echo of that conversation. His voice quavers slightly.

There’s only one thing I can say to that. I lift my chin and aim for haughty, but I don’t have it in me. My lip trembles as I say, “That would imply that I think of you at all. Which I do. I do all the time. I have every moment since I left your side.”

His lips flick into a sad smile. “Can we talk?”

We’re already talking, but I know that’s not what he means. I’ve yet to invite him in and he still stands on the other side of my threshold. I glance behind me at my messy bed, my cramped quarters, the stale air resulting from my self-imposed convalescence. “Yes, but not here.”

“A walk then?”

I nod. “How would you like to *really* see the stars?”

After leaving a note for Podaxis telling him where I’ve gone and not to worry, I take Dorian to Cape Vega. We walk side by side in silence, sharing my gifted Lumies until the bag is empty. His presence is a comfort, but his distance from me is equally distressing. Every inch feels too great. The absence of his hand in mine feels like a missing limb of my own. But I don’t dare reach for him. I still don’t know why he sought me out. It’s after midnight and tonight was the last night of his bridal pageant. He could be… married.

We finally reach the cape and make our way to the edge of the bluff. The sea below is dark and calm, the surface sparkling beneath the light of the moon and stars. Dorian lifts his eyes to the sky, and I watch his expression shift to awe. His lips melt into a smile and his eyes crinkle at the corners.

He sighs. “I haven’t seen the stars like this since I lived in the Wind Court.”

“This is the best place to see them in Lumenas. We’re far enough away from downtown. I come here now and then to look at the sea. It’s as close as I’ve allowed myself to get since…” I trail off, realizing such a topic is getting painfully close to tense subjects.

Dorian’s eyes leave the sky to find my face. Then his gaze slides to the water, the sliver of rocky shore beneath the bluff. “This is where you rescued me, isn’t it?” He nods toward the water. “That’s where my ship went down.”

I nibble my lip, realizing this might not have been the best place to bring him after all. He might see it as insensitive. I’m about to apologize when he speaks again.

“If you rarely come here, what are the chances that you came the same night I was? The exact moment my ship was attacked?”

My pulse pounds. I study his face, seeking signs of suspicion. Does he think…

“You saved my life, Maisie. If you hadn’t been here, I would have died. You could have left me to drown. You could have abandoned me on the beach or turned me over to the authorities. You could have done any number of things, yet you saved me.”

My chest feels a bit lighter, but I suppress the hope that begs to grow. “I also tried to kill you, Dorian.”

“Was anything between us real?”

I hold his gaze, willing him to feel the truth of my words. “All of it. The good…and the bad. Nothing can erase what I tried to do to you. Not even an immortal lifetime would be long enough for me to express how sorry I am that I ever took that bargain.”

“You were cursed to die if you didn’t take it.”

“That or become a full-time assassin for Queen Nimue.”

“An impossible choice.”

I shake my head. “No. I know the right one now. I should have known it then too.”

“What will happen to you? Will the curse remain if you don’t kill me?”

I choose my answer carefully. “Zara was convinced Nimue has no intention of letting me die.”

“Good.” He looks back at the stars. I do as well, but I can only focus on him. He stands so close, yet so distant, his arms pinned to his sides, mirroring my stiff posture. Every muscle in my body aches with the desire to draw nearer to him. But I don’t. I still don’t know why he’s here. Why he wanted to talk. His presence might not mean what my heart hopes it does.

I hold my breath and wait for him to speak again.

Minutes pass.

Then a sigh. Slowly, he looks over at me.

My brow furrows as my eyes lock on his. His expression is unreadable, uncertain. He’s neither the stoic brother of Saint Lazaro nor the lighthearted boy at the boxing match. He’s a man stuck between. Or perhaps somewhere outside of both.

A light touch brushes my fingers and I stifle a gasp. My body goes still as I wait for the touch to recede. But it doesn’t.

His fingers brush mine again, this time with more obvious intent. He glances down at our hands. Then, finger by finger, he weaves his through mine.

His voice comes out barely above a whisper, his gaze still locked on our clasped hands. “Will you ever forgive me?”

I frown, uncertain I heard him right. “There’s nothing to forgive. I’m the one who should be begging you.”

“So will you?”

“Beg? Or forgive you?”

Keeping our fingers laced, he angles his body to face me. With his free hand, he brushes a strand of hair off my forehead, freeing it from the light breeze that tangles my pink tresses. His eyes take on the intense quality I’ve come to know well. “I should have come to you the minute I learned you were safe. Podaxis got word to me that you’d escaped Zara.”

My eyes widen. “He did?” My little friend never mentioned that. Part of me wants to feel betrayed, but it holds no weight. Podaxis did what I couldn’t bring myself to do. What I didn’t think Dorian would want me to

do. Despite my relief that Dorian seems grateful I survived the vicious fae, mention of Zara sends a pit in my stomach. “I killed her.”

Surprise flashes over Dorian’s face for just a moment.

Words tumble out of my mouth, and I tell him everything that happened after he saw me and Zara disappear from my bedroom. I tell him about being trapped in the sea, then my conversation with her on the beach. How Nimue manipulated me, hid the truth of my not-always-lethal kiss, and cursed my lips instead. How I tricked Zara into the bargain that killed her. Until this morning, I hadn’t been certain it had. Then Podaxis used his spy talents and listened around the precinct. There he confirmed a body was discovered in one of the cells. A sea fae with brown and white scales and W-shaped pupils. One no officer recalls bringing in.

I shudder to consider what I did, and yet…

“I’m disgusted that I killed her, but I don’t regret it.”

He places a hand on my cheek. “I would have done it too. A thousand times over if it meant saving your life. I hate that I froze when I first saw her. All I could think about was the fae I killed. I seized up, body and mind.”

I lift a tentative hand and place it on his chest. His heart pounds against my palm. “It’s not your fault.”

“That’s why I started boxing, you know. I had nightmares about the fae I killed for years. In some of them, she ate me alive. In others, I was the monster and carved her up limb by limb. I would always wake screaming, tasting her blood in my mouth, feeling it invading my nose and eyes. When I took up boxing, I felt strong. It helped me get used to seeing blood on my hands without thinking of hers. It taught me I could fight and defend myself without it resulting in another’s death. The nightmares stopped.” He steps closer, pressing the fronts of our bodies together. “But when I saw her attack you, I wanted to kill her. My rage snapped me out of my fright. If only I’d been faster. If only I’d shut her up before she drove her wedge between us.”

“You regret knowing the truth about me?”

“I regret that you were forced to tell me before you were ready.”

I avert my gaze, a swell of shame rising into my heart. “I wasn’t going to tell you. I…I—” I can’t bring myself to confess the rest. That I had planned to go to my death so that he could live. That I was too selfish to die with him hating me.

He places his forefinger under my chin and tips my head back so that I meet his eyes again. “I understand why you did it. Why you did all of it. All I want to know is this…do you have feelings for me?”

I open my mouth to answer, but a question of my own escapes my lips. “Are you married?”

He smirks. “Would I be here right now if I were?”

I shrug. “If you’d chosen Vanessa…then I wouldn’t blame you for being eager to get away.”

“I didn’t choose Vanessa,” he says with a chuckle. “I didn’t choose anyone. The competition has been postponed. It has been ever since the attack.”

“Because of your injuries?” I reach for his shirt collar and pull it gently back to reveal more of the bandaged wound. Just seeing the place Zara cut him with her sea glass blade sends a fresh wave of rage through me. I place my hand back over his pulsing heart.

Dorian leans closer until our foreheads touch. I keep my head angled down so my lips stay well out of reach. “Because the person I want to choose is no longer part of the contest.”

My breaths grow sharp and shallow. “We both know you can’t choose me. Just because you know the truth…it doesn’t change your situation.”

“I heard what Zara said. I don’t need the church to become a citizen. The only fae I needed to fear had been Zara all along. Well, and…you.”

I wince at that, but when I pull back to look up at him, he wears a crooked smile. “Does that mean you’re leaving the church?”

His expression falls a little. “No. I made vows and the church has already done everything for me that they said they would. I can’t go back on my side of the promise.”

“Then what is there left for us?”

“I’ve spoken to Father Viktor. I told him what I learned from Zara, how the assassination attempt had been personal. Then I asked him to allow me to follow my heart. Told him if he really wants to improve the church’s reputation, it can’t just be for cosmetic purposes. Saint Lazaro needs to change from the inside. Bridal pageants might bring modern audiences, but they won’t stay unless the heart of the church grows wide enough to fit broader perspectives. And if he wants me to represent a new generation of the brotherhood, then he needs to let me do it as I am. If he wants me to serve in more than just name alone, then he must allow me to operate from

here." He presses both his hands over mine, the one still resting over his heart.

"He agreed?"

"Begrudgingly, but yes." He takes my face in both hands, and I place mine at his wrists. Partly to maintain contact with his skin, but also to give me some semblance of control over him should he forget himself and try to kiss me. "He gave me his blessing to choose you, but I would have if he hadn't. We'll have one final Blessing Ceremony to put a public end to the contest, but it no longer needs to end in a wedding."

Emotion overwhelms me, so much that I'm at a loss for words.

"Maisie." He utters my name like a rumbling growl, as if it scalds his lips with both pleasure and pain. "Put me out of my misery already. If you do not love me, tell me so. I understand if you don't. I'm not worthy of you. I know I'm not."

"How can you say that?"

"You're a princess. Bold and brave and beautiful. I'm nothing but a brother of a church you probably despise."

"I'm not much of a princess."

His lips curl at one corner. "And I'm not much of a saint. You're more than a princess to me. You're my Maisie. My selkie. My temptress. You've tempted my heart from my chest, set it beating again, made me think it was *worthy* of beating again. I've kept myself from you as much as I can. From the start, you stirred something inside me, a rebellious fire, desires I wasn't supposed to have. Not for you. Not for anyone. When I agreed to the competition, I harbored no hopes that I could fall in love in the span of a week. I'd resigned myself to a loveless marriage for convenience's sake alone. I didn't think it would matter who I was paired with, so long as I was given the means to provide for my sisters. But then I met you…"

"And I tried to murder you as soon as I got you alone."

He chuckles, then his tone deepens. "Your kiss may have been deadly all this time, but from the moment you tried to press your lips to mine, I've thought of little else. I tried to push you out of my thoughts. Tried to do what Father Viktor wanted. The only time I succeeded in the slightest was after Zara forced you to reveal the truth. I felt betrayed by you then, certain everything I felt for you had been in vain. And if it has, I'm all right with that. If you don't want me, I'll respect that. I'll walk away. Do my duty. Leave my heart at your feet. But if any part of you wants me back—"

“I do.” The words rush out before I realize I’ve uttered them aloud. They echo in my ears, thrumming with the beat of my heart, his heavy breaths, the crashing of the waves below the bluff. The truth of them wells up inside me, warming me from head to toe. “I love you, Dorian.”

42

His expression turns elated as he repeats my words back to me. “I love you, Maisie.” His voice is so rich with affection it draws tears to my eyes.

I want to give in to the moment, ride the tides of joy our mutual declaration begs to stir…but I can’t.

“Dorian, there are more reasons we can’t be together.”

He runs a hand through my hair, sending shivers down my spine. The other winds around my waist. Mine drop to his chest. “Name one good reason,” he says.

It takes all my restraint not to let my lashes flutter closed, not to tip my head back and relish in the feel of him and the pleasure of knowing I have his heart. My voice is breathless, words stilted. “I told you what Zara said. My next kiss will kill no matter what I’m feeling.”

His hands move up my back, then down, rounding my hips. “Then we don’t kiss.”

My palms tingle, eager to do what he’s doing, explore the planes of his body. “Then how do we…you know.”

“How do we what?” He laughs. “How do we be in love? Have a relationship? There’s more to both than kissing.”

“I know. But there are…other things.”

“Like what?”

My cheeks burn. “Like…making love.”

He presses me hard against him and heat pools deep in my core. “There’s more to making love than kissing too. Besides, I can kiss you,

can't I? I kissed your cheek and survived. If only your lips are poison to me, that still leaves ample landscape for me to worship."

My toes curl at his words and the visions they conjure. "Dorian…"

"What?"

There's one more thing to confess, and I know I should tell him. When I told him what Zara said about Nimue having no intention of letting my curse take my life, I didn't elaborate. Didn't tell him that she'll tempt me to bargain for my survival, and the bargain she's prepared to offer will make me one of her Sisters of the Black Eel. An assassin. A killer. Not someone who's willing to do what it takes to survive or defend the ones she loves. Someone like Zara, happy to kill without mercy, delivering justice without stopping to consider her opponent's perspective.

My lips part as I prepare to tell him…

Tell him that…

All thoughts melt away as I tip my head back and get lost in his gaze. No one has ever looked at me the way he looks at me now. Few have seen my darkest aspects and continued to love me. It's a luxury I never thought I'd have. I thought I needed to sever my deadly magic to be loved, but here is a man who desires me as I am, lethal kiss and all.

Maybe it's selfish to keep one last secret.

But if it means keeping him tonight…

"All right," I whisper.

"All right, what?"

"Choose me. Now."

His expression flickers between joy and confusion. "You want to do the Blessing Ceremony right now? At the church?"

I shake my head, then move my hands slowly over his chest. One hand slides up to his shoulder and behind his neck, careful to avoid his bandaged wound. I run my fingers over the close-cropped hair at his nape, relishing its velvety texture. My other hand moves lower, over his torso, his stomach. His breath hitches, and the muscles of his abdomen contract. I let my hand rest at his hip. "Here, Dorian. Choose me here and now."

He seems to tremble with restraint, his grip tightening in my hair, behind my back. A pleasurable thrill runs through me. "I'm going to kiss your cheek now," he says, voice thick with desire.

Mine sounds the same. "I'll hold still."

Inch by inch, he slowly lowers his head. I keep my eyes open, my muscles poised to turn away should he get too close. Fear and excitement war in my chest as his cheek presses against mine. I feel his breath caress the shell of my ear. He angles his head and lights the softest press of his lips to my cheek.

My lashes flutter closed for the briefest moment as I luxuriate in the feel of him. The kiss seems monumental. It's the only one I've ever received out of love. The only one I've been fully present and open to accept. Warmth spreads throughout my chest.

He pulls away and repeats his slow movements on the other cheek. When he next pulls back, I think that might be the end of it. Maybe it's enough, but now that I've felt his lips, I crave more of him. He must see the longing in my eyes, for he draws in again, his hands leaving my hair to trail down my neck. I tip my head back, sighing at the dance of his fingertips on my flesh. Then his lips land at my earlobe and trail a line of fire down the column of my neck. When he reaches the base, I feel the soft flick of his tongue. He draws it up my neck to my ear, and the sensation is so surprisingly pleasurable that a moan escapes my lips.

He stiffens, pulling me against him. The tension in my muscles begins to loosen. My fingers weave through his dark curls as he tugs aside the collar of my shirt to taste my collarbone. I purse my lips against their desperate burn, their hateful tingle, and will myself to ignore the feel of Nimue's curse. Not so I can be careless but so I can pretend they hum with desire, not magic. It isn't hard to pretend, for a deep yearning to taste him back, to meet his mouth, to explore his tongue, envelops me. I feel a spike of fear, but the pleasure I feel in this moment is far greater.

Dorian kisses his way back up my neck, my ear, my cheek. Then he pulls away slightly until our eyes meet. Our gazes lock as he begins to explore me with his hands. He runs them slowly down each arm, then up my back. He touches my neck, traces my collarbone with featherlight pressure. With one hand, he runs a finger down the row of buttons on the front of my shirt. His breaths turn hard and heavy as he moves his hand over my stomach, pausing over my ribs. I lean into his touch, a silent plea for him to continue. Finally, he moves his touch higher, higher, until my breast fills his palm. Again, he pauses, and I feel my chest rise and fall. The linen cloth between his hand and my skin is too much. I yearn to experience him against me.

The look in his eyes tells me he feels the same. Every feature speaks of his craving, mirroring my own. Keeping my eyes on his, I move a hand under his shirt, feeling his muscles tense as I run my fingers over his bare stomach, up his chest, and back down again. When I reach the waistband of his trousers, I tuck my thumb beneath it, caressing the warm, hidden flesh. His grip tightens on my breast and a soft moan escapes my lips. That seems to undo him. Unravel him.

His lips come back to my neck, but his kisses are no longer slow and gentle. They're hard, urgent. I cry out with the restraint it takes not to kiss him back. He pulls me close and reaches beneath my thighs. In one move, he hoists me up until my legs are wrapped around his waist. I tangle my arms behind his neck, run my fingers over his scalp. He carries me away from the end of the bluff to where the grass is thicker, denser. There he lays me down. Our fingers grow frantic as we reach for each other's shirt buttons. I have his shirt undone first and tug it off him. I'm given just a moment to revel in his beauty, taking in his bare skin beneath the moonlight, pale patterns of old scars, the marred flesh of his shoulder, pink scratches on his chest where Zara raked him with her claws. Then he comes back down to me, working my buttons, placing a kiss with every inch of skin he reveals. I run my hands over his shoulders, his arms, but I pause when my hand comes over the bandage over his throat.

Reason sobers me just enough to say, "Won't I hurt you?"

He pulls back with a smirk. "No."

"But you're injured."

"Not enough to make me stop." This time, it's his turn to freeze. His expression turns serious, brow furrowed. "Unless you want me to stop."

Maybe we should. Maybe I should let my desire be quelled here and now. Maybe I'm a sinful creature for continuing, knowing what tomorrow brings. But, as I've already determined, I'm not the kind of fae to seek salvation.

In answer, I tear free the remaining buttons on my shirt and shrug it off. I lift myself up on my forearms, holding his gaze, daring him to resist me.

He doesn't. His lips come to my shoulder, his hands to my stomach, my ribs. He trails his tongue down my chest and around the curve of my breast. When he reaches the apex, he flicks his tongue over it. I throw my head back, arching into the sensation. His lips leave too soon, and he kisses down the middle of my stomach. I'm already undoing my trousers when his lips

meet my waistband. When I'm free of my pants, I target his next, undoing the closures and pushing them down. My eyes lock on what awaits, my pulse pounding in my ears. Then his lips are back to my stomach, then trailing lower. Lower. Lower still.

His lips tease my inner thighs and send me shuddering. His next kiss catches me by surprise, directly over the molten center of me. I tense at the pleasure of it, the vulgarity, the impropriety. His tongue comes next, slow and languorous over places I didn't know could be tasted. I go limp as he draws unimaginable sensations with that devilish tongue. It's almost too much to bear, but somehow not enough. I start to roll my hips, eager for something deeper, harder.

I know what I need.

With a hand on his shoulder, I gently push him away. He obeys, and I turn him onto his back. I straddle his hips, then run my hands over the planes of his chest. So badly do I wish to kiss every inch of his flesh like he did me, but it's too great a risk. I've never dared test the limits of my lethal kiss. Even if I had, with Nimue's secret curse, there's a chance I could kill Dorian by kissing him anywhere. I bite my bottom lip just to remind myself I'm in control. Then, slowly lowering myself over him, I let him fill me.

We return to our earlier slow pace. Our eyes meet and I feel a new sense of vulnerability. Of being seen. Loved. My breath comes out long as I rock against him, acquainting myself with his feel, the burn of his gaze, the pounding of my heart as I watch his lips part. Once we find a rhythm, our heated passion returns. His hands grip my hips. I remain as upright as I can, keeping my lips firmly out of reach should our desire turn mindless. Throwing my head back, I close my eyes. I feel him shift beneath me, and my lashes flutter open. He lifts himself up to sitting, his arms moving behind my back, our chests pressed together. The feel of his warm flesh against my breasts has me shuddering, and the shift in position brings on a whole new level of sensation.

And yet…

"Dorian," I breathe. "We shouldn't be this close while we do this. It's too dangerous."

He pulls me closer, stopping when our lips are mere inches away. "I like a little danger. A good boxer knows how to dance with it."

"My danger could kill you."

"You won't."

“How do you know? I could close my eyes and accidentally brush my lips over yours.”

“Then keep your eyes open. Keep them on mine.” He moves beneath me, caressing a hand down my back, the other up the front of me.

A moan flees my lips and our rhythm returns. Locking my eyes so closely with his as we continue our dance is a new experience. Strange and intimate. No gasp of his escapes my notice, no moan made without getting to see the expression that accompanies it. It takes my passion to a whole new level, and I think it might be the same for him. Every time my lips part, every cry I make, his desire seems elevated. I see the exact moment he reaches the edge of pleasure, and it’s enough to bring me to mine. He fists my hair, and I bring my hand to his jaw. Release burns hot at my core, deeper than it ever has before. It’s equal only to the warmth in my chest, the love that radiates from my heart, pounds with every beat, roars through my blood like a wicked current.

Pressure builds deeper, deeper, begging to be unleashed, and I can feel it twisting my expression. He sees it too, his face like a mirror. Just when I think I can’t handle any more joy, any more love, any more treacherous pleasure, I unravel with a moan. Dorian is unable to resist meeting me there, his own release chasing mine, a race, a battle. One where we both end as victors. We continue to hold each other’s gaze as the throes of passion send shudders through our bodies. The look on his face is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen in the world.

It takes us several moments to catch our breath and several more to separate. When we do finally pull away, Dorian collapses on his back with a chuckle while I prop myself next to him. He tugs me into the crook of his arm and plants a kiss on my forehead, then begins to caress my back. I rest an arm over his chest and draw lazy circles over his sweat-soaked skin. The silence that follows is comfortable. Calm.

Finally, I speak. “Did you just break your vows?”

He gives me a wry grin. “I’ve taken an Order. I’m no longer beholden to vows of celibacy.”

I snort a laugh. “I doubt this is what the brotherhood had in mind.”

“It’s a loophole I’m perfectly fine with.”

“What exactly are your vows as a brother?”

He shrugs a shoulder, but the gesture seems to take far too much effort for his state of fatigue. “Our vows are long winded. At their core, they

revolve around Saint Lazaro's three main tenets—service, truth, and strength. The vows that matter most to the brotherhood are the ones we state at the very end of our initiation. *With this body, I am a shield against sin. With these hands, I light His Holy Fire. With these lips, I speak salvation.*"

I lift my head and give his naked form a once-over. "I'm not sure your body got the shield against sin part right."

Another halfhearted shrug. "There are other ways to use one's body to represent Saint Lazaro. One day, I have every intention of making vows that are even more important than the ones I made to the brotherhood."

I smile, realizing what he's suggesting. I let myself imagine the wedding we'll never have. Lifting myself slightly over him, I study every inch of his face. Committing it to memory. To my heart. Tears threaten to glaze my eyes, but I blink them away.

His brow knits together. "What is it?"

My last remaining secret lies between us, but I don't dare reveal it now. Instead, I settle on a truth I can share. "I love you, Dorian. Please don't ever forget it."

"I love you," he says back, brushing his fingers over my cheek.

With a contented sigh, I rest my head on his chest, letting the sound of his heartbeat mingle with quiet waves. The sound of my love meets the sound of the sea. It's a pairing I never knew I needed. Sunrise will come, and with it…

No, not tonight. Tonight, I'm in love.

Tonight, I'm free.

Tonight, I live.

43

I wake a couple of hours later. The sky is still black, the stars still bright above, but I know dawn must be fast approaching. Dorian and I are draped in our discarded clothing, our bodies still nestled close. His chest rises and falls beneath my head, an intoxicating rhythm I'm tempted to enjoy just a little longer. My stomach plummets at the thought, and I know I can't linger. Slowly, I extricate myself from him, pausing now and then to ensure I don't wake him. He mumbles once, something unintelligible, a small smile tugging his lips. My mouth mirrors his as I brush a lock of hair off his forehead. Then, with reverent movements, I tuck his clothes over his body and don my own. Once dressed, I stand over him, wishing I could hug him.

Wishing I could say goodbye.

But I don't. I leave him with a parting smile and make my way down the side of the bluff. When I reach the rocky shore, I perch myself close to the water, eyes on the horizon. I wait like that for minutes on end—maybe hours—relishing the feel of the wind in my hair, the smell of salt, the sound of waves. The warmth of Dorian's skin still tingles over my own and I let the memories of our time together wrap around me like a blanket. I think of him sleeping on the bluff alone right now and hope he doesn't wake. If he does, I pray he doesn't look too hard for me. It's better for us both if he doesn't.

After a while, a clacking sound reaches my ears. I feel Podaxis settle in next to my hips. Patting his carapace, I greet my friend. I expected he would

come, especially since I left my letter telling him where I was going with Dorian.

"What are you doing, Maisie?" he asks.

My answer comes out quiet, peaceful. "Waiting for the sun to rise."

He taps his pincers together, eyes turned down with worry. "Do you think Nimue will come?"

I sigh. "If Zara's right, then yes. She will do whatever she can to make me join her Sisters."

"At least you'll live."

I worry my bottom lip. "Did you see Dorian when you got here?"

"Yes."

"Is he still sleeping?"

"He is." A pause. Then, "Do you think you'll get to see him again?"

"No." My throat tightens.

"I'm sorry," he says, shrinking down. "I know how you feel about him."

I believe he really does. Because it's what he feels for Nadia. And that is why I must say what I say next. "Podaxis, I want you to leave before Nimue gets here."

He huffs. "Try all you want, I'm not leaving."

"Where I'm going, you cannot follow."

"Why? Because I can't become one of the Sisters with you? I'll do whatever I can to stay close, even if I must haunt Nimue's palace like a wraith."

My shoulders slump. I knew he'd put up a fight. "You have a life here, one that's only just beginning. One with Nadia."

His mushrooms dim a shade paler at that, a sure sign that he knows what he'd be giving up if he follows me. "I know, but I promised myself I'd never let you off on your own."

"That's not a promise you should have made."

He opens his mouth but doesn't speak for several moments. When he does, his tone is tenuous. "I've always blamed myself for what happened with Luther."

I whip my gaze to him. "Why?"

"Because I refused to come to town with you. Refused to learn to shift forms. The night you met him…I should have been there."

"That wasn't your fault, Podaxis. That was mine."

“If I’d gone, I could have looked out for you. If I’d learned to shift, I could have fought him off. I’ve known all this, yet I’m still frightened to shift. Perhaps more so. I thought if I could prove shifting to be impossible for me, I wouldn’t have to feel guilty about what happened to you. That’s why I don’t like to leave your side now. Why I’m not even sure I can leave you to be with Nadia.”

I scoop my friend up in my arms and hug him to my chest. “No, Podaxis. Please don’t feel that way. What happened the night I killed Luther had nothing to do with you. You may be my best friend, but you aren’t responsible for me.”

“I like being responsible for you.” Laughter enters his voice. “If I’m not, who will be?”

“You’ve been the best friend anyone could ever ask for.” I hug him tighter, then set him back on the ground. “But it’s time to let me go. I want you to be happy. To experience love.”

“I don’t know if I can—”

“You can,” I say, voice firm. “You can and you will. Nothing will ever stop us from being friends. You will always be my brother.”

He shrinks down again, claws clacking together. “Why does it feel like you’re saying goodbye?”

I select my answer with care. “I am, Podaxis. You will not come with me.”

“Surely, we’ll still see each other again. I don’t care if you’re made to become an assassin. I don’t care—” He cuts off and stares at me, his tiny eyes growing wider. His mushrooms pale again. “You’re not going to accept her bargain, are you?”

I purse my lips and look away from him. My gaze shifts to the east, where the palest blush of light begins to spread.

“You can’t let yourself die!” he says, voice breaking.

My heart aches at his agonized tone. “I won’t let Nimue manipulate me for a second more. If she’s willing to let our broken bargain and the curse she placed on me take me to my death, so be it. I’d rather die than be controlled by her.”

He circles me until he stands in front of me, shifting side to side to try and get me to look at him. “Dorian wouldn’t want this.”

“He wouldn’t want me to become a mindless killer like Zara either.”

“He’d rather you live as an assassin than die.”

“It doesn’t matter what he would want, or even what you want. This is *my* choice. My life. My death. I’ve already made peace with it. I’ve lived well. Found friendship. Experienced love. I will not let Nimue take that from me, sour my memories, crush my spirit.”

He taps his pincers, but he’s finally left without argument.

“When Dorian wakes up, tell him I’ve returned to the sea. That I’ve left him my heart and it will forever be his.”

“Maisie—”

I stare down at my friend, expression firm. “Tell him. And promise me you will let yourself love after this. That you won’t let my loss break your heart. That you will never be afraid to show your true self. Love with abandon. Love with every fiber of your being. Do it for me. For yourself.”

“But you, Maisie. My love for you may be different from what I feel for Nadia, but it’s just as real.”

Tears prick my eyes, and my voice becomes strangled. “You will love me too. So long as you do, I will never die.”

“That’s not true at all.”

My lips curl into a smile. “It’s true enough.”

He sniffles, and my heart twists in my chest. I’m about to pick him up for another hug when a rippling movement in the distance catches my eye —the unmistakable flick of a sea serpent’s tail. Nimue. She doesn’t draw closer, only waits in deeper waters, her tail drawing sinuous patterns over the surface. The horizon has turned a shade brighter. Soon dawn will give way to sunrise and the curse will burn the clothes from my flesh, leaving me naked. A selkie without her skin. Without clothing during daylight hours. I’ve never witnessed what happens next, but I know how it ends. I will die. Even if I dive to the bottom of the sea, I won’t escape death. Instead, I’ll turn to seafoam.

To nothing.

It’s a terrifying thought, one that spikes panic, gives me just a moment of temptation to accept any bargain that keeps such a fate at bay.

Then I think about Dorian. About how many others like him Nimue could command me to kill. I lift my chin, eyes narrowing as I watch the rippling shape draw closer.

“Go, Podaxis,” I say, tone laced with urgency. “Hurry! Don’t let her see you, please. Watch over Dorian. Make sure he doesn’t wake up to see any of this.”

He hesitates, expression shifting between rebellious and terrified. Then, finally, he scurries away. My heart cracks with the realization that that was the last I'll ever see of him.

The horizon brightens further, the eastern sky no longer black but navy painted with russet and gold. Gentle waves lap onto the shore, curling around my bare feet. With a deep breath, I step into the water.

CLOSING MY EYES, I BASK IN THE FEELING OF THE SEA, OF ROCKS GIVING way to sand beneath my toes the deeper I go out. I stop when the water comes up to my neck, then I dunk my head under. Pressure builds in my ears, but I try to recall what it was like in my sealskin. The way it felt to have blubber all around me, insulating my bones against the chilliest waters. I think about swimming in my lagoon with Podaxis, doing flips and turns as we explored every corner of our play area. I recall catching fish, sating myself until full, then napping with my brothers beneath the warmth of the sun. When my lungs grow too tight to hold in air, I breach the surface. A peaceful smile settles over my lips, one that remains even as I feel sunlight touch my eyelids. Even as I open them and find Nimue several feet away. I see only her upper body, her pale flesh and silver hair, her cruel lips set in a frown. When I see my sealskin draped over her shoulders—the same way Zara wore it after she stole it from me—my smile slips away.

"Daughter," she says. "You have failed our bargain. I know this, for I would have felt it if you succeeded, would have sensed the severing of our bargain's bond. The boy still lives, does he not?"

"He does," I say, "but I killed Zara."

Surprise crosses her face. Then fury. "I didn't ask you to kill Zara."

"You didn't have to. I was more than happy to oblige for personal reasons."

Her jaw shifts side to side. "Very well, daughter. You may have robbed me of one of my greatest assassins, but you have proven your worth. Come. Your place is with the Sisters of the Black Eel. I'll revoke our bargain and end your curse if you join us." She extends a hand.

I make no move to accept it. "Zara told me everything. Told me how you misled me to believe fulfilling your bargain would put an end to my

deadly magic."

"It would have," she says, tone innocent. "I would have revealed the truth of your powers."

My tone darkens. "You enchanted my lips so that I'd kill whether I wanted to or not."

"What difference does it make? You already thought your kiss was forever deadly. All I did was ensure your success as best I could."

I roll my eyes. "You didn't care if I succeeded. You never meant for me to be free of you."

"Why should I want you to be free of me? You're my daughter. I've waited your whole life to be a mother to you."

"When will you understand? What you're doing—what you *did* to me—that's not being a true mother. If you cared for me at all, you never would have cursed me. Not the first time when you gave me ten days to live. Not the second time when you bastardized my magic. You never would have sent me to kill a man I'd saved. Never would have tricked me into believing the Alpha Council—and my father—sanctioned my actions. You knew I would have been devastated if I completed my mission. You knew I'd fear my father's disdain for my actions."

"I meant it as a lesson in trust, Maisie. You're too soft. Too gullible. You trust too easily. Nothing I did was meant to harm you but to make you stronger. I was going to tell you the truth."

I sneer at her, hating the fact that she can utter her words aloud. If she can, it means she believes them. "You're out of your mind, Nimue. I want nothing to do with you."

Light blares into my eyes, the sky blushing brighter with every second that ticks by. A flash of pain ignites over my shoulder. Then my arms. With every inch the sun rises, my skin grows warmer.

Nimue pales, eyes dipping down to my sodden shirt. "Maisie, this is no time for hurt feelings. You will die if I don't revoke your curse."

A sizzling sound rises from my skin, followed by the smell of burning. Steam rises from the water around me. I lift my arm and find a hole burning into my sleeve. The skin beneath it is unmarred but it feels as if it's on fire. Grimacing at another flash of pain, I return my gaze to Nimue. My voice comes out strained. "Then do it."

Her eyes go wide, and I'm surprised by the panic twisting her face. "I will, daughter. Just take my hand and accept your place as a Sister."

I bite back a cry as my sleeves continue to burn. “No.”

She slaps the water in frustration. “That’s the only bargain I’m offering you. You must take it or you’ll die.”

“Then I’ll die free.”

She charges closer, a roar escaping her lips. “You stubborn girl! You’re just like your father.”

“I am.” Beneath the water, I feel my legs begin to sear, my trousers burning at the cuffs, then the knees. My sleeves are almost entirely gone.

“I won’t save you.”

“I don’t want you to.”

“You’ll turn to seafoam. You’ll be nothing.” Her voice trembles more and more with every word.

My trousers burn up my thighs, and my knees buckle. “I’m everything I want to be.”

She crosses her arms. “I’m not bluffing.”

I cry out, a burning sensation now coating my skin entirely, even in the places where my clothing has already burned away. My head spins from the pain, my eyelids fluttering shut of their own accord. I hear a loud splash, but I don’t know where it’s coming from. Then the sound of my name. Agony clouds my brain, twists my thoughts as my lungs tighten. My legs give out beneath me, and I fall back beneath the surface of the water. From a corner of my mind, I wonder if it’s already over, if I’m already seafoam. Surely, seafoam doesn’t feel this much pain.

I’m vaguely aware of arms circling my waist, pulling me above the water. My heels scrape rocks as I’m dragged to the shore. Someone sets me lightly down and I feel something come around my shoulders. A shirt. Or my sealskin, perhaps? Did Nimue save me after all? My skin still feels like it’s burning, but whatever article wraps around me clears my mind. I open my eyes, blinking into the growing light. My relief quickly turns to terror as Dorian looks back at me. It’s his shirt that’s draped over me. He fits it more properly around me, aiding my arms into the sleeves, securing the buttons. Then his hands are on my face, my arms, trying to soothe my agonized flesh.

“Maisie. No, Maisie.” His voice is strangled, and soon I understand the source of his increasing panic. The shirt has begun to sizzle just like my previous one.

“It’s all right,” I whisper through chapped lips and close my eyes once more.

“Revoke this curse, monster!” I hear him shout.

“I will not,” comes Nimue’s icy tone, “but you can. It isn’t fully sunrise yet.”

My mind is slipping back into its garbled state, and I can no longer comprehend the meaning of the words they exchange. Only when I hear my name do my eyes snap open. Steam rises all around me, obscuring Dorian’s tear-stained face as he takes my cheeks between his hands. I almost moan at the relief his touch brings, a momentary respite from the burning.

“I love you,” he says. I try to speak but can say nothing back. He says it again for the both of us. “I love you, Maisie. That is my vow. That is the only one that matters. With this body, I am a shield…for you. With these hands, I protect you. With these lips, I give myself to you. Always you.”

He presses his lips to mine.

I’m too weak to fight him off, too weak to even understand the significance of his gesture. Then, little by little, my mind begins to clear. My skin ceases to burn, the pain lessens. Dorian’s lips remain pressed to mine, warm and full and passionate. For a moment, I think Zara was mistaken or that Nimue’s dark enchantment on my magic has failed. Dorian’s kiss seems to last forever, lingering with proof of his continued life, continued breath. A surge of joy leaps through me as I lift my hands to find his arms. He pulls away then, gently. His eyelids are heavy, a smile curling his lips. Then, with a contented sigh, he collapses to the shore.

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A scream shatters the air around me, and I belatedly understand it's coming from me. I scramble toward Dorian's lifeless form, my hands moving over his chest, his neck, finding no signs of life. There's no breath. No pulse. I place my palms over his chest and pump several times. Nothing happens. I want to do more, perhaps give him the kiss of life, but I can't—

Realization dawns.

He claimed my cursed kiss, the only one that would ever force me to automatically kill. Which means my lips are no longer deadly. Not unless I'm filled with hate. I open his mouth, keeping all thoughts and emotions centered on love, on saving him, and try to perform the kiss of life. I breathe into his mouth the way I've seen my brothers do. When that doesn't appear to work I return to pumping his chest.

"He's dead, daughter."

I whip my head toward Nimue. She hovers at my side, upper body propped upright by her serpent's tail. "What did you do?"

She lifts her chin. "I did nothing. It was his choice."

I shake my head as tears stream down my cheeks—cheeks still warm from his touch. "This isn't what I wanted. It was supposed to be me."

"Better him than you. He's no one. You're a princess. You're—"

"Save him," I say, remembering what she did for Zara. "You have that power. You can bring his soul back to his body."

She scoffs. "I'll do no such thing."

I sneer at her. “Then I will.” Closing my eyes, I disappear into the Twelfth Court. When my eyelids open, I find the familiar purple cast to my vision. The shore pulsates with violet particles, the waves trapped in an unmoving tableau. My eyes lock on Dorian. I look over his form, finding it exactly as it was in the normal world. Unlike everything else around me, his coloring is muted, the particles barely buzzing. I rise to my feet and look around. When Nimue saved Zara, her spirit was found a short distance from her body. I stare into the violet haze, seeking something brighter than the rest, shapeless. Finally, I see it. An undulating light-form rippling a few feet away. I run to it, but my steps float, bounce, like they always do in this realm. When I reach Dorian’s spirit, I try to grasp it, but the particles simply disperse around my touch. I try again, but the form has less physical substance than other things do in the Twelfth Court. Normally, all I need is my intent to pick something up, move something. And the opposite intent to walk through it. But this…the light-being isn’t acting like anything else I’ve encountered here. I rack my mind, trying to recall what Nimue had done.

“Come,” I say, echoing the words she’d spoken to Zara’s spirit. I extend my hand toward it. “It’s not your time yet.”

The light-being shows no sign of understanding me. So I try something else.

“Dorian,” I whisper, my tone grating against my ears, so wrong in this realm. “It’s me, Maisie. Please take my hand. Come with me. I’m not ready to lose you.”

His spirit ripples once. Twice. Shudders.

“Please, Dorian. You don’t have to go.” I hold my breath as the bright purple particles begin to buzz faster, shine brighter. Then the form begins to shift, extending something like a hand from its main mass. My heart leaps as I take it. I begin guiding the form back toward Dorian’s body, but my lungs start to contract. The particles around me grow thicker, heavier. “No, no, no,” I mutter, pulling the light-being a little faster.

Pressure builds in my skull as I guide the spirit down to its body. But this is where my plan ends. Nimue sang to Zara in a language I didn’t understand. A song likely passed down from her banshee father. Banshee magic is deeply connected to life and death, and they weave their power through wailing tunes. I too must have inherited some of this magic, as evidenced by my power to kill with a kiss, to enter the Twelfth Court at will. But that’s all I can do, all I understand. I’m not as strong as Nimue. I

can't even stay in this realm longer than a few minutes. Already my vision has gone nearly black, and I've no idea how to save the man I love.

"Dorian," I say, feeling strange floating tears leave my eyes to dance in the particles around my head. "Come back to me."

The violet fades, blue and tan and gold breaking through.

My voice rises to a shout. "Come back to me!"

The particles around me ripple. Then, suddenly, the realm is back to how it was minutes before. My breaths ease, my vision returns clearer. At first, I think it's because of something I've done. Then I notice Nimue's presence, her violet form hovering before me, lips pulled into a frown.

"Help him," I say, voice pleading. "If you ever felt even the slightest love for me at all, you'd help him."

"No, it is because I love you that I will let him die. Romantic love is a curse, Maisie, not a gift. It makes you weak. Vulnerable. Heartbreak robs you of power. I'm trying to save you from that."

"You have no right to save me from it. It's my choice whether I love or hate."

"He is but your first love. Do you not think I haven't been there myself? I've felt what you've felt. A desperate burning in my heart. Irrational desires. Blinding passion."

"When have you ever felt anything close to what I feel?"

"With your father," she says. Her answer surprises me. "You may have been told our love was a one-time affair, and perhaps that's what it meant to Ronan. For me, it meant so much more. We hated each other for so long. Fought over our values, over the right way to serve the Sea Court. After the last war, Ronan and I decided to work together. For the first time, our allegiances were one and the same. We both wanted to protect the sea from humans who meant to test our new borders, and our methods complemented one another. His were proactive and mine were punishing. He warded off threats before they drew too near, while I destroyed those who dared challenge us at close quarters. We still fought, still argued, but for the first time, there was no hate in our conflict. Soon it turned to passion."

My stomach turns a bit, and I hope she spares me further detail.

"Our alliance became what I thought was friendship, then shifted again to something more. He supported me when I presented my petition for the throne as Unseelie Queen of the Sea. We even spoke about him ruling at my side as my mate. My consort. We'd be an unstoppable force. I don't know

what I did to make him change his mind, but without telling me, he petitioned to take up the crown of Seelie Sea King. No longer content to rule as my partner, he chose to counter me instead. To live in his own palace. I was too heartbroken to challenge him. Shortly after, I discovered we'd conceived you. For the first time since he took his new throne, we met face to face. He was so cold, so cruel. I knew his love for me had either died or been nothing but a figment of my imagination all along. That's when we made our bargain."

Everything she's saying contrasts what I thought I knew about her relationship with Father. I know he had his reasons to take the seelie throne. He found her to be dangerous, was convinced her power needed to be tempered by his. But could he have broken her heart? Could he have discarded plans they once shared, traded dreams of ruling together for the chance to be king in his own right? Or perhaps that's just how Nimue saw things. Whatever the case, I understand the fleeting nature of truth. It can mean one thing to one person and another to someone else. Nimue's issues with my father may be justified. Or not. That's between them. It has nothing to do with me.

I stare down at the form that remains beneath my hands, the light-being pulsing within the dull purple of Dorian's body. My gaze returns to Nimue. "Do you regret it?"

She quirks a violet brow. "Do I regret what?"

"Your time with my father. Your affair. The night you shared conceiving me."

She's silent a few moments before answering. "No, because it brought you into the world. You may believe me to be a terrible mother, but I do love you, Maisie. I do."

"Then you must understand why I can't let Dorian die. Why I'm begging you to bring him back."

"Begging me? Does that mean you're finally willing to bargain?"

All the sympathy I felt during her tale of heartache dries up. I glare at her, wishing my ethereal form could properly convey my rage. I want to scream at her. Shout. Hiss.

But I don't.

I take a moment to collect my composure. "Yes, Nimue, I'm ready to bargain. But not for what you want from me. Dorian gave his life to save me from my fate. I won't dishonor his sacrifice by going back on what I've

already told you. I will not be owned by you. I will not be your tool. If you want to be my mother, then free me. Prove your love for me is real and not simply a means to possess me. Save Dorian's life, release your claim on me as your subject, and I…" I swallow hard. "I'll forgive you."

She blinks a few times. Particles shift over her face, obscuring her expression. "If I refuse, I have everything I want."

"No, you won't. You may have my allegiance to your court through force, but you won't have my love, my respect, or my forgiveness. I'll fight you every step of the way. I'll resist your commands until it kills me." I look back at Dorian. "But if you do this…I promise to do my best to understand you. Not as my queen. As a person. As my mother."

She slithers closer. "He'll break your heart."

"Then let him. You said love makes us weak and vulnerable, but I don't believe it. If that's the case for you, then it's only because you let pain make you cold. You let heartache turn from a temporary fracture to a gaping hole. I won't do that to myself. Not anymore." I think of this past year, how I've hidden. Not just from Nimue, but from everyone. Friends. Potential lovers. I let my past eat a hole in my heart, convinced myself my darkness makes me unworthy of love. I convinced myself love could only be found in kisses. But Dorian taught me that's not true. Podaxis and my friends taught me too. I still have a lot of work to do, a lot of people to be honest with… but I can do that now.

Nimue watches me, expression unreadable. Then her face falls. "You aren't like me at all," she whispers. Then she lowers down on the other side of Dorian and reaches a hand toward my face. The particles buzz between us at the touch. Her eyes take on a wistful quality. "You're like *him*. So much like him."

I nod.

"I wish he'd loved me."

"I'm sorry."

She holds her palm to my cheek a few seconds more, then places her hands over Dorian's chest. Her lips part in song, her eerie melody filling the space around us. I watch Dorian with bated breath, trembling as she finishes her tune.

Violet shatters around me and the beach returns in a rush of color and sound. I blink against the change in light, seized by a moment of vertigo.

My vision clears just in time to find Dorian surging forward on an intake of breath, followed by a few violent coughs.

"Dorian!" I feel his cheeks, his forehead, finding them warm and full of life. His coughing fit subsides and his eyes find me.

"Maisie. Are we both alive? Or…both dead?"

I throw my arms around his neck and sob into his shoulder. "We're alive."

He hugs me back, his embrace growing stronger with every breath we take. We stay like that for what feels like an eternity. Then the feel of water begins to lap around us. The tide is coming in. With a startle, I remember Nimue. Whirling around, I look toward the sea. It's empty. There's no sign of her on the beach. No evidence of her tail rippling the surface of the water. Then a patch of gray fur catches my eye a little farther up the shore. It's my sealskin. I run to it, hugging it to my chest and relishing the familiar weight of it. Dorian joins me, his moves only slightly slower than normal. That's the only lingering evidence that he was—for a short time—dead.

"That's your selkie skin?"

"Yes." I begin to wrap it around me. Dorian helps, and we settle it about my shoulders like a cape, the head behind my own like a pulled-down hood. All that remains of my clothing is Dorian's partially singed shirt. He, however, is in nothing but trousers.

"It's beautiful. I'd like to see you as a seal sometime." He brushes a wind-strewn strand of pink hair away from my face. Our eyes lock, and I nibble my lip. I'm desperate to feel his mouth against mine, especially now that I know my curse is broken. Only anger can make me kill, and I feel nothing close to that. Doubt plagues me, and I lean slightly away from him. Taking my hand, he pulls me closer. "Kiss me," he says.

"I'm afraid."

"I'm not."

"Dorian, I could still kill you."

"Are you angry right now?"

I grin. "Not at all, but that doesn't mean I won't be someday. What if we fight? What if our lips meet in the tide of anger-fueled passion? What if I kiss you and accidentally feel a flash of rage?"

"Then we'll learn to treat our kisses with respect. We'll learn to only come together in kindness."

"It's still dangerous. I'm dangerous. I'll always be deadly."

A corner of his mouth lifts. “I already told you. I like a little danger.”

The heat in his voice has my stomach doing a flip. My heart pounds, warm with relief. Exhilaration. Love.

Letting only those feelings wrap around me, I press my lips to his.

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We kiss for what feels like a pleasurable eternity. I lose myself in the feel of his soft mouth against mine, of his tongue caressing my own. Every sensation is new, a gift, a luxury. I think we'd probably kiss all the way until sundown if not for the sound of approaching footsteps. We slowly break away and turn toward the interloper. I frown, finding an unfamiliar figure walking toward us from the bottom of the bluff.

He looks slightly younger than me with seafoam-green hair, just a little longer than Dorian's. He wears gray trousers and a matching waistcoat, the sleeves of his shirt rolled up to his elbows. His expression brims with uncertainty. Or is it guilt? He stops several feet away, shifting from foot to foot before he brings the tips of his fingers together and anxiously taps them.

My eyes lock on his hands. I recognize that gesture.

He freezes, then looks down at his fingers, fluttering them before shoving them into his trouser pockets.

Stepping forward, I assess the man with fresh eyes. The color of his hair is so similar to a certain creature's carapace. And that outfit. I've seen it before, in the dressing room at the Vulture's Prose.

"Podaxis?"

He gives me a wary grin. "I know. I'm…I'm too skinny, aren't I?"

It's so strange hearing my friend's voice come out of this man's mouth. I run the rest of the way to him and fling my arms around his neck. "No, Podaxis. You're perfect."

He awkwardly pats my back before seeming to understand the proper motions to return a hug. “You’re not angry with me?”

I pull back from him. “Why would I be angry?”

His eyes dart to the side, and I see Dorian coming to join us. My friend looks back at me with a grimace. “I didn’t do what you asked. I didn’t make sure Dorian stayed asleep. Instead, I…I did the opposite.”

“I can attest to that,” Dorian says.

I frown, looking back at Podaxis.

He takes a step back, eyes averted. “I didn’t mean for him to die, Maisie. Only for him to—I don’t know—convince you to take your mother’s bargain. I had no idea he’d kiss you. Either way, I went against your wishes.”

My stomach sinks. I admit, I’m disappointed he didn’t respect my need to make my own choice regarding Nimue’s bargain. He brought Dorian into this after I asked him not to. His actions got the man I love killed.

But, in the strangest turn of fate, they also led to us both being able to live.

He shifts from foot to foot again. “Can you ever forgive me? Someday?”

“You’re already forgiven. I just want to know one thing. What made you decide to shift?”

Another grimace. “Well, you see…Dorian was deeply asleep. I tried pinching, jabbing. He only swatted me away. That’s when I realized hands might be useful. To be entirely honest, I’ve been practicing shifting now and then, but never for too long. I was…too afraid to let anyone see me. This time, though, it felt a bit urgent so I…” His eyes dart to Dorian again, expression apologetic.

“So he punched me in the gut with his fist.”

My eyes go wide as they lock on Dorian. Only now do I notice a mild red mark at the center of his stomach.

He laughs. “You’re strong for someone who has rarely used hands.”

Podaxis shrinks down, shoulders bunched up. “Sorry.”

Dorian shrugs. “I’m not. It allowed me to save her.”

“And me to save you,” I add. “Sort of.”

“How did you save me, anyhow?” he asks, brows lowered. “How am I alive?”

I sigh. “It’s…a complicated story, but I’ll tell you.” I open my mouth to begin explaining the Twelfth Court, my ability to travel there, and Nimue’s mysterious powers over life and death, when Podaxis speaks.

“So, neither of you are mad at me?”

Dorian and I say, “No,” in unison.

“Great. Because there’s something I should do at the theater. Perhaps if I get there early enough…” He frowns down at his legs.

I extend an arm and hesitantly ask, “Do you want to shift back? I can… carry you.”

He considers my offer for a moment, then stands tall. “No. I’m going to walk there on my own feet.”

“We’ll join you,” I say. “Although I daresay we’ll look quite the spectacle.” I glance between me and Dorian. I’m dressed in nothing but a shirt and sealskin cloak, while Dorian wears only trousers. Thankfully the shirt is long enough to cover past my hips. Besides, it’s barely after sunrise. Hardly anyone is awake this early in the city of Lumenas.

“Does your theater have anything I can wear for a shirt?” Dorian asks. “I should return to the church and tell Father Viktor I’ve secured my final choice for the contest.” He grins at me, sending my heart aflutter.

“Right,” Podaxis says, clapping his hands. “I’m in a bit of a rush, so can we go?”

As soon as we step inside the theater, I understand the source of Podaxis’ urgency. Nadia comes rushing out from backstage. She’s dressed in a silk robe, her dark hair coming loose from her curling pins. Her eyes lock on me and she brandishes her forefinger. “Why are you people always running off and making me worry? Have you seen Podaxis? I’ve been looking for him everywhere. He left me some scribbled note that sort of looked like it said *goodbye*, and—”

“I’m sorry, Nadia.” Podaxis steps forward, brows knitted together.

Nadia freezes in place, eyes wide. She assesses him from head to toe, much the way I did when I first saw him in this form.

“I’m so sorry,” he says again. “I shouldn’t have done that. I was… afraid. And other things were happening, and I…”

She takes a step, which seems to rob him of further words. Then another step. Another. Each one less tentative than the last until she stops before him. Slowly, she reaches a hand to his hair, running her fingers along the seafoam strands, studying them with keen interest. I feel like Dorian and I should leave, but I'm too afraid to move. Too afraid I'll shatter their moment. Nadia runs her hand along the side of his face, then the curve of his jaw. Finally, her lips curl into a smile and she crushes him with a hug. "Dax," she whispers.

His arms wrap tightly around her, and my eyes begin to water at the sight. He's done it. He shifted forms and confessed his feelings. Or at least started to. I imagine he has much more to say, and I doubt he wants an audience for it. I nudge Dorian to start sneaking away, but as soon as we take a step, they break apart. We freeze, but Podaxis and Nadia only have eyes for each other. They stand apart just a moment before Podaxis rushes in and claims her lips with his. Just as fast, he pulls back, expression turning to terror.

"I'm so sorry," Podaxis says. "That was brash—"

Nadia takes his collar and pulls him back to her, and his words are lost in another kiss. She winds her arms around his neck while he pulls her close, hands moving up her back, her neck. Hair pins clatter to the ground.

"Go, go," I whisper to Dorian. Stifling our laughter, we skitter away backstage.

Later that night, I'm back at the Church of Saint Lazaro. I sit in the front pew, bundled in my sable-trimmed coat. Dorian's sisters sit to my right, whispering furiously while stealing giddy glances at me now and again. To my right are Podaxis and Nadia, their fingers laced together. At the end of our pew, closest to the aisle, Glint McCreedy holds out his notebook, pen poised and ready to write at the first sign of anything interesting. Behind me, the nave is packed with spectators. It caused quite a stir when the sign outside the church stated the pageant is back on for a final Blessing Ceremony. I bite my lip and suppress the urge to fidget, doing my best to keep my hands in my lap. My eyes remain fixed on the dais, although it's empty for now. Any moment, the pageant will begin.

I remember the first time I was here. It feels like an eternity ago. So much has happened in the week since I came here, seeking to end a man's life. Even more has happened in the span of today, and I do wish I were snug in my bed. I'd even take stealing in the streets over this. The last thing I want is to become an exhibition, especially after my little speech I gave last time I stood on that dais. But Father Viktor insisted the bridal contest be postponed no longer. Tonight, the pageant ends.

And a new life for me begins…

I still don't know what that entails. After tonight, everything changes. I'm a princess who no longer needs to hide. I'm a woman in love. I have my sealskin back. I can go anywhere, do anything.

Whatever I do, I'll do it with *him*.

My heart feels warm at the thought, and my nerves begin to calm. Just then, a figure steps onto the dais and goes over to the pianoforte. It's Initiate Jeremy. He starts into a song, and the audience goes silent. My pulse quickens as a door to the side opens. Father Viktor enters the nave, followed by Brother Billius. Then it's him. My love.

The three step onto the dais, with Viktor at the center. Dorian stands just off to the side. His eyes seek the front of the audience. It takes him less than a second to find me. When he does, his posture visibly relaxes, and his face flickers with a smile. I can tell he's trying hard not to let his affection show too much. It's not time yet.

Next, footsteps sound down the aisle from the far end of the nave, and the three remaining contestants—Briony, Greta, and Vanessa—take their places on the dais. I study their faces, wondering if they've been informed of tonight's surprise. All seem in good spirits. Briony wears her signature gray wool dress although her demeanor is as confident as if it were a ballgown. Greta stands with a hand on her hip, chin raised, lashes fluttering as Sam Sputnik catches photographs from his tripod. I feel a flash of sympathy when my eyes land on Vanessa. Despite my opinion of her, I hate that she was tied up in a wardrobe by Zara. The girl didn't deserve such cruelty, not to mention the murder of her chaperone. I seek signs of grief, but her expression is as haughty as ever. At least the bruise over her eye where Franny Delafonte punched her has receded.

Father Viktor steps forward and presses his fist to his heart. "Welcome, children of the Almighty, good people of Lumenas, to our final night of

Brother Dorian's bridal competition. May Saint Lazaro's Holy Fire forever warm our hearts."

"Blessed be His Holy Fire," Dorian and Billius utter back.

Viktor spreads his arms out in a shrug. "Tonight is a bit unconventional. Not only has Brother Dorian chosen his bride, but his choice is a woman he's already eliminated." He pauses dramatically, which gives the audience ample time to gasp and whisper. It seems Viktor is learning the ways of a proper showman.

From the corner of my eye, I see Glint McCreedy's pen fly over his notebook. I glance back at the three girls on the dais but find no shock on their faces. That must mean they've been fully briefed on tonight's happenings. Relief runs through me, and I find my nerves settling further.

Viktor speaks again. "Before we get to Brother Dorian's final choice, I'd like to hear from our three remaining contestants." He turns toward the girls, voice lowering with sympathy. "I know you must be dreadfully disappointed that the man you've been courting has lost his heart to someone else, someone the three of you already saw leave the competition. Still, I have a feeling your experience wasn't in vain. Vanessa Courter, tell us what life has in store for you after tonight."

She steps forward with prim grace, then holds out her hand. The light catches something sparkling on her finger. "I said yes to Brother Billius."

Another wave of gasps rolls through the audience, even from me. I look to Billius and find his lips curled into a smile. His gaze slides to Vanessa, his ruddy cheeks turning pinker. I still can't help thinking of his gaze as leering, but if it works for Vanessa, I suppose I'm happy for them.

"Congratulations, Miss Courter and Brother Billius. I wish you two the best of marital bliss."

Vanessa steps back in line, but not before I catch a soft smile on her face as her eyes flash toward her fiancé.

"Greta Garter," Viktor says, "tell us where we can expect to see you next."

She walks nearly to the center of the dais with swaying steps. With a shake of her hips, she says, "I've secured the lead role in *The Governess and the Rake*."

I've no idea what that means, but a few people in the audience let out whoops and whistles. Dorian's sisters lean their heads together. "Oh, I've

read that book," Tabitha says. "It was mentioned in Queen Gemma's Recommended Reads column a few months ago."

Beatrice whispers back, "They're making a play of it? Won't that be… scandalous? That book is rather racy."

"This is Lumenas, dear girls," Glint McCreedy says, inserting himself into the conversation. "There's no such thing as scandalous when it comes to theater."

I stifle a laugh and return my attention to the dais.

"Congratulations, Miss Garter," Viktor says. "I'll be sure to attend opening night. Briony Rose, what will you be doing next?"

She steps forward with a grin that looks more like a grimace. "I'll be returning to the convent," she says dryly, then steps back.

"Wonderful," Viktor says. "There's nothing like being surrounded by the Almighty's children, is there not?" Briony looks like she wants to laugh at that and instead presses her lips tight. Viktor faces the audience again. "Now that we've been assured no hearts have been too badly broken, it's time to meet Brother Dorian's beloved." Another dramatic pause. Podaxis and Nadia look over at me with eager grins, while Tabitha and Beatrice fling their hands over to clasp mine. They're nearly bouncing in the pew as they bite back excited squeals.

I'm surprised by their reaction. I haven't spoken to them since the night in the parlor, but it seems Dorian has told them about his intentions with me. I meet their eyes and share a grin before looking back at the dais.

Dorian takes Viktor's place at the center. He clears his throat, then speaks. "This woman may have been eliminated from the competition, but she'd already won my heart before that. We thought our love could never be, for many reasons. We harbored secrets, prejudice, and dark pasts that seemed insurmountable. We were wrong about so many things, and once she stole my heart, there was no getting it back. So…" He angles his body toward my pew and extends his hand. "Princess Maisie, will you have me?"

I nibble my lip, ignoring the gasps and whispers around me. Part of me wants to simply say yes and sit back down, but that isn't part of tonight's plan. So, firming my resolve, I shrug off my coat to reveal the gown underneath and make my way to the dais. I feel ridiculous in the dress and would prefer something far more modest, but Nadia insisted I make a splash during the grand reveal. That was after I shut down her suggestion to wear the shimmery dress I wore to the boxing match. Instead, she all but forced

me into a confection of lace and chiffon. The bodice is white brocade, the neckline low. The underskirts are white as well but are layered in pale pink and aqua chiffon. The sleeves are enormously puffy, but instead of the stiff ones I've worn before, these are fluffy chiffon like the top layers of my shirt. The dress was apparently worn for a wedding scene at the theater, and Nadia spent all afternoon sewing the extra layers to it, as well as silk shells and sea stars on the hem.

The audience goes quiet as I meet Dorian on the dais. He takes my hands, and the light of Sam Sputnik's camera bulb flashes from below. We pause, eyes locked, letting him take several photographs. Brother Billius comes up behind Dorian. He releases my hands to take something from him. When he turns back to me, he asks, "Will you accept this token of my affection? My choice? My love?"

I look down at the paper bag in his arms, then up at his wry grin. The smell of Lumies wafts into the air. Murmurs move through the audience from perplexed spectators who have no clue as to the significance of the gesture. To me, it's better than any flower. I burst out laughing. "I will."

He turns back to Billius and takes something else. Then he gently removes the bag of Lumies from my arms and sets it on the floor. My fingers tremble as he takes my left hand and slides a simple band of gold over my ring finger. I knew the ring would be part of the Ceremony. Even though we decided a hasty wedding wouldn't be necessary now that he doesn't need a fae marriage to gain citizenship, Father Viktor insisted Dorian and I get engaged for the sake of the show. But the way he settles the ring at the base of my finger and stares into my eyes, it doesn't feel like a show at all. My heart flips in my chest, swelling with warmth. "I'll get you one with pearls someday," he whispers.

"I don't need pearls, Dorian," I say with a smile. "Only you." I'm about to lean in for a kiss when I feel a hand on my shoulder. It's Father Viktor. That's right. I'd almost forgotten the blessing portion of the Ceremony.

Dorian and I step slightly apart. Viktor keeps his hand on my shoulder and closes his eyes as he whispers his prayer. Then, addressing me, he says, "Princess Maisie, the last time you stood on this stage, you told the brotherhood we could kindly…well, you know." The audience chuckles. "While we may not see fully eye to eye, I confess you shared a perspective I needed to hear. I've always considered myself a modern priest, one who would elevate Saint Lazaro's Lumenas chapter into the current age and

beyond. You, however, revealed certain follies in how I've chosen to execute my ideas. Like this very pageant. I've treated Brother Dorian as a mascot, not a man in search of love. I tried to control him instead of trusting him to follow his heart."

I try not to let my guilt show. While I agree the church has much growing to do before I'll fully respect them, he was right about me. For a time, at least. I infiltrated the competition as an assassin. Intended to kill a member of his brotherhood. Plotted murder in the room I was graciously given. Sabotaged other contestants through theft. I now know Dorian kept my dark motives a secret from Father Viktor, even after the attack, but that doesn't change the other things the priest knows I've done. He may believe the fae are the progeny of demons, but…he's a good man. A forgiving one. Maybe someday, we truly will see eye to eye.

He opens his mouth to speak again, but my words come out in a rush. "Will you forgive me?"

His expression shifts, brow furrowed. For a moment, I don't think he'll reply. Then his face softens. "I do, Your Highness. You and Brother Dorian have my deepest blessing." With a final pat to my shoulder, he steps back. The crowd rumbles with applause.

The camera bulb flashes again and Dorian takes my hand. We turn toward the crowd. I take in the sea of faces before us. Again, I'm struck by the awareness that everything changes after tonight. I have no idea what my daily life will look like after this. I no longer need to steal. No longer need to hide or live in a tiny bedroom in the back of a theater. Dorian too will be free, especially once his citizenship is made final. As a brother who's taken an Order *and* received Viktor's blessing to represent the church in his own way, the world will be our oyster. We only began discussing the possibilities earlier today, and it's still so new that it's almost overwhelming. Where do we go from here?

Dorian squeezes my hand. I look over at him, and I know the answer. From here, we go wherever we want to. For the first time for us both, the choice is ours. We'll make it together.

With my heart racing, mind whirling with new hope and new possibilities, we leave the dais and take the first step toward our new lives.

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER

My flippers cut through the water with ease. I chase the current, spinning and turning beneath the waves for the joy of it alone. I've had my sealskin back for a year, as well as the freedom to don it whenever I choose. Even though it feels like the most comfortable hug when I wear it, my seelie form has become equally as cherished, for it's the body that allows me to hug, to dance, and to kiss. For travel, though, my seal body tends to be the fastest, especially when coming to and from visits at Father's palace like I'm returning from now.

The warmth of blubber insulates me as I dive through deeper waters and traverse the colder depths surrounding the Autumn Court lands. I remain close within the confines of the magic emanating from the wall of standing stones that line the perimeter of the isle, never straying beyond its protection. A school of striped angelfish darts by, distracting me. I swiftly turn over and chase them for a while just for fun, just to feel my body move and luxuriate in the water rushing over my coat. Before I get too off course, I turn back in the direction I'm heading—to the Star Court.

Lumenas.

Home.

I don't make it far before something shiny catches my eye from the sea floor. Curiosity gets the better of me, and I swim toward it. As I draw near, I realize it's a broken pocket watch, its face shattered. Even so, the brass around it glimmers. My whiskers twitch with my desire to take it. I circle it a few times, debating how badly I want it. I've forgone thieving much of the past year. After life began to settle down—after Nimue, the pageant, and the publicity I unwittingly attracted from winning Dorian's heart—I got to see what life as a proper princess is really like. Turns out, it comes with money. And money can buy all the shiny things I like.

I've never quite managed to fully erase the thrill of taking found objects and making odd collections. Now, though, I have rules. My treasures must truly be found, and not on a person or one's property. The sea, of course, is basically my property if I reason it right.

That decides it for me. I swim low to the ocean floor. Then, reaching for just a touch of magic, I seek my inner form, the one with hands and feet and gangly legs. With my fingers, I part the hidden seam of my sealskin and slip

out just the tip of my hand. As quick as I can, I snatch up the pocket watch and reseal the seam. Movement catches my eye, and I find a crab gawking at me. Well, truth be told, I can't tell if he's gawking at all, considering his facial expressions are minimal. It's simply a crab, not a fae creature like Podaxis. Regardless, I can't help feeling like my antics might have fried the little guy's brain. I can't imagine it's every day one sees a seal with a human hand reaching from its belly. I snap my teeth at it for good measure, then continue on my way. There's something far prettier than a pocket watch waiting for me back home.

The sun is setting by the time I reach Orion Street. I'm in seelie form now, dressed in silk trousers and a lace blouse, my sealskin draped over my shoulders. My wardrobe has been significantly improved this past year. No more threadbare tweed jackets and men's trousers. Now my slacks are of the finest spider silk, my shirts comfortable yet well-fitting. With a small fortune at my disposal, I've been introduced to the world of fashion. Not that I've taken a full interest in it like Nadia has, nor am I brave enough to experiment with anything too flamboyant. Instead, I've discovered upscale boutiques specializing in fae styles, comfortable skirts and dresses, tailor-made slacks, shiny brocade vests, and lace blouses that don't crowd my neck. I've come a long way from dressing like a boy to blend in. Now I simply dress like…me.

I stop outside the Vulture's Prose, the façade no longer marred by chipped black paint. Instead, it's painted a midnight blue. Strains of music beckon from inside, telling me the theater is currently in the middle of a show. I open the door and find a packed audience in front of the stage—a stage that has seen many improvements, I might add. It now boasts a brand-new curtain, a polished floor, and several new lighting fixtures. The latter are even electric. Finally. One of the first things I did after I discovered just how much money I have to my royal name was buy a share of the theater. I'm now a partner in its ownership. Mr. Tuttle was more than happy to give up half the control so long as I was paying for all the renovations and improvements I wanted to make. Now the Vulture's Prose has earned a

name for itself on Orion Street, renowned for its varied forms of entertainment from plays to burlesque and acrobatics.

I head for the back of the audience, where I find Podaxis. He's in seelie form—the form he most frequently wears now—staring at the stage. His lips are in a lopsided grin, eyes entranced as he watches Nadia's lithe form turn, bend, and sway as she performs on her lyra.

With a grin, I elbow him in the side.

He startles, his face brightening when he sees me. "You're back!" he says, voice loud enough for me to hear over the music blaring from the stage. He crushes me in a hug, then pulls me farther back from the rest of the audience to where we can speak a little easier. "How was your visit with your father and brothers?"

"It was great. They asked when you'll come with Nadia again."

"Soon," he says. "She's been asking for another beach vacation. How are things with your father?"

It takes a moment for me to ponder my answer. After everything that happened with Nimue, I was worried things would be tense between me and Father. It was hard not to view him differently, and I'm sure he felt the same about me. The first time I went back home, it seemed like a lifetime had passed since I was last there. I wasn't the same baby seal I was when I lived in my lagoon, nor was I the guilt-stricken girl who killed the first boy she'd kissed. I'd learned so much. About my father, about my mother. About my magic, my heart. Me. The secrets Father had kept from me felt like a wall. Little by little, though, we began breaking it down. He gave me more insight into his relationship with Nimue. His stories confirmed much of what Nimue had revealed, but from his own perspective. It solidified what I'd already begun to understand on my own—that love and relationships are complicated, whether between enemies or lovers. There are two sides to everything. I think it's safe to say my relationship with my father has grown stronger. He's started seeing me not as his precious baby but a woman in my own right. His daughter. A true princess.

"Things are well with us," I finally say. I hesitate before adding the next part. "I saw my mother too."

His eyes bulge with surprise. "And?"

"It was…not terrible," I say with a grimace. While I know Nimue and I will never have the kind of relationship I have with my father, things have changed. She's made no mention of wanting me to join her Sisters, renewed

no claim on me as her subject. There's still much to fear about her, much to dislike. But I made a bargain stating I'd forgive her. That I'd try to understand her. She kept up her part of the bargain and saved Dorian's life. I'm determined to keep up mine. If she proves to be as evil as I've always thought her to be, well, I can always challenge her to the throne.

Podaxis blinks a few times as if he can't fathom my answer. "What did the two of you even do together?"

I shrug. "We sat on the beach outside Bircharbor and talked. It was a very short visit, and a bit tense at that, but I think—in some strange way of hers—she's trying to do better by me."

"That's good," he says, although I can tell he's skeptical. I don't blame him. I'm not sure I'll ever come to fully trust my mother after everything she did. Despite my promise to forgive her, I never vowed to trust. She'll have to earn that.

"She still hasn't outed you for what happened with Zara?"

"You mean me murdering her favorite assassin with a bargain?" I await a flash of guilt, but even after a year, I still feel none where that wretched fae is concerned. What that says about me, I'm not sure. "No, she's told no one and has demanded no penance from me. In return, I'll continue to keep her involvement in Dorian's shipwreck a secret too."

"Mutual secrets," Podaxis says.

"Makes for mutual allies. Or enemies. I'm still not sure."

I feel a pair of hands rest on my shoulders. Turning, I find Klaus and Stanley grinning at me. I let them pull me into a hug.

"Are you performing tonight?" Klaus asks.

I roll my eyes. "Certainly not."

"Everyone loves your magic shows," Stanley says.

"They really do," Podaxis adds.

I suppose they're right about that. A few months back, Nadia convinced me to turn my talents for sleight of hand into a show at the theater. I didn't think performing simple feats of misdirection would entertain anyone, especially when real magic exists and is far more interesting. Turns out, humans are easy to impress, and fae are amazed by magical feats that don't actually involve magic. They're flabbergasted by how I do the things I do, make things disappear, tear playing cards in half only to pull them out of someone's top hat, fully intact. I've still never learned to relish attention

like the other performers do, though. It's bad enough Glint McCreedy has made it his mission to document my public life in the wake of the pageant.

"Have you seen your loverboy yet?" Klaus says with a wink. "He's been haunting the theater like a lost puppy since you went on your trip."

My heart flutters. "Is he here now?"

"In your room," Podaxis says.

Excitement bubbles in my chest and I offer hasty farewells before darting away. I'm almost to the door that leads backstage when a figure intercepts me. She's female, just a few inches shorter than me with turquoise hair. She wears a long coat, but beneath it, I see evidence of a fine dress. A black cord circles her throat, adorned with an opal moon. My nose twitches as my gaze locks on the necklace. I swallow my desire to swipe the pretty bauble off her neck. Then she says my name, and my eyes fly back to her face. "Maisie, is that really you?"

I shutter my eyes, trying to recall how we'd know each other. Then I notice the man who stands behind her, a tall, slim figure with silver hair. He wears an oversized top hat and layers of dark clothing, but that doesn't stop recognition from dawning. My mouth falls open. The girl is the servant I gave my glamoured shoes to when I first fled the Lunar Court, and the man is Prince Franco. I've heard only rumors about what transpired between them after I left, but now the evidence confirms it. My lips spread into a grin. "Ember! Is it true you're a princess now?"

She hushes me. "We're undercover." She glances at the prince, her lips tipping into a lovelorn smile. "We eloped."

I lower my voice. "Congratulations."

"We'll have to do it all over again once we get back home, but we wanted a private ceremony that would belong just to us."

I lift a brow. "So you came here?"

"Twenty-four-hour wedding chapels," Prince Franco says with a crooked grin. "Turns out they're all the rage in Lumenas. Plus, my wife has a thing for this city."

Ember lets out a dreamy sigh. "I've been desperate to come here for years. We finally had an excuse. We've been visiting all the music halls. I heard I might find you here."

"You came to the Vulture's Prose to see me?" I'm flattered by the thought. I only knew Ember for a handful of minutes, but I've always hoped to see her again one day.

“I wanted to thank you in person,” she says, taking my hands in hers. “Because of you, things worked out the way they did.” She casts another sweet glance at the prince.

My mind brims with questions, my curiosity equal only to my desire to get to my room and find Dorian. I haven’t seen him in a week, but even that feels too long. Despite my longing for him, I’ve come to value friendship equal to romantic partnership. I return the squeeze of Ember’s hands. “How long will you be in the city?”

“One more day,” she says.

“Would you like to meet for lunch tomorrow? I’m desperate to hear the full tale of you and the prince.”

“I’d love that.”

My smile widens. “Wonderful. Meet me here at noon. I’ll take you to try the best Lumies in town.”

If my mood wasn’t already so buoyant, it certainly is after seeing Ember. I’m brimming with excitement to speak with her tomorrow, but now my mind is set on getting to my room. Backstage, I head up the set of newly built stairs that lead to my improved living quarters. After I became a partner in the theater’s ownership, Mr. Tuttle insisted I take a better room. Not wanting to disrupt Nadia, Klaus, or Stanley’s rooms, I had our unused attic space turned into a bedroom. I clear the top stair and step into my spacious living area. The ceiling is slanted and strung with tiny orbs of electric lights that look very much like stars at night. The walls are painted a deep blue that resembles either the sea or the sky—depending on one’s perspective. I glance around my room, seeking Dorian, and find him on my bed. His eyes are closed, one hand propped behind his head, face slack with the peace of slumber.

The sight of him sends a stupid grin stretching over my face. It doesn’t matter how many times I get to see his handsome visage, it only gets more dazzling every day. Or perhaps that’s just the love talking. Either way, my cheeks warm as I tiptoe to the bed. Sitting next to his sleeping form, I remove my sealskin from around my shoulders and lay it at the foot of the bed. I assess him, finding him dressed in plain trousers, a shirt, and an open

waistcoat instead of his Saint Lazaro uniform. He continues to don the black jacket and slacks in public, but he slips into casual attire every chance he gets. He's been busy the last several months. Once his citizenship was secured, he was able to consider what he wanted to do as a profession. As a brother from the Order of Strength, he was expected to represent the church in some adjacent way. So, naturally, he returned to his love of boxing. Not fighting but advocating for professional boxers. He joined Lumenas' Board of Athleticism where he now works to ensure safe conditions for fighters, auditing arenas, reassessing rules and sanitation requirements. He also works to expose any illegal fighting operations.

I lift a hand to his forehead and brush aside one of his black curls. His lips part with a sigh as I caress the side of his face. He reaches a sleepy hand to mine. His lashes begin to flutter. He opens his eyes and as soon as they focus on me, a sly smile curves his sensuous mouth. I lean in just as he starts to pull me down. Our lips meet in crushing heat. He turns on his side and I press myself against the length of his body. Our kiss deepens as his hands rove my hips, my thighs. "I missed you," he says against my mouth.

"I missed you too."

He pulls away slightly, drinking me in as his hands weave through my tresses. I've kept them short this past year, and I'm not sure I'll ever want to grow them out. The way Dorian's fingers slide so easily through them only makes me love the style more. "I meant to surprise you, not fall asleep." His voice is a deep, rumbling whisper, one that always sets my pulse hammering.

"I'm glad you fell asleep," I say, planting a kiss along his jaw.

"Why, so you could sneak up on me?"

"No, because I like the look of you in my bed."

He pauses, his hand in the middle of tracing the side of my neck. "Do you?"

"Of course I do."

"Huh," he says, pretending to look ponderous. "That's very interesting because I actually like the way you look in *my* bed."

"Is that so?" I kiss him again but feel him stiffen. Pulling back, I study his face. His expression has turned serious, reminding me of the stoic brother he often becomes when he dons his uniform. But stoic isn't the right word for him right now. No, there's something else in his eyes. Is it… trepidation?

“What if…it was *our* bed?” he asks.

I furrow my brow. “What do you mean?”

“What if, instead of your bed and mine…there was only one.”

A giddy blush heats my cheeks. “Are you saying you want us to live together?” I admit the sentiment is tempting. After Dorian secured his citizenship, he got a townhouse on Halley Street that he shares with his sisters. Meanwhile, I’ve continued to reside at the theater. That doesn’t mean we don’t spend nearly every night together, either at his place or mine. But there’s a reason we don’t live together. Why we sneak from each other’s homes at dawn. Dorian’s Order may allow him to forgo a vow of celibacy, but we’re only engaged, not married. There may be a loophole in his vows, but we both know the church would be less than thrilled if we shared a home before marriage.

“I’m saying more than that, Maisie,” he says, taking my hand and threading our fingers together. Another look of trepidation shutters his features, but it's soon replaced with a smile. “I’m saying I don’t want to wait anymore. It doesn’t matter whose house we live at. We can live at both. We can live at neither and buy a house by the sea. All I know is I want to spend every night with you and not have to skulk out at dawn. I want to make love to you in the middle of the day and kiss you passionately in public. I want to do everything. I want us to be everything.”

My heart thuds against my ribs, my chest swelling with warmth. “What exactly are you saying?”

“Marry me.”

I study his face, making sure he’s serious. There’s mirth in his eyes, but no teasing. “You really want to?”

“Yes. I’d marry you tonight if you’d let me.”

My cheeks turn pink, and my hands begin to tremble with excitement. “I did just learn about the existence of twenty-four-hour wedding chapels in the city.”

His expression brightens and he shifts his weight, turning me onto my back so that I’m halfway beneath him. “Is that a yes? You’ll marry me?”

In answer, I throw my arms around his neck, arching closer to him as I wrap my legs around his waist. Desire pulses deep in my core, merging with the pure joy that hums through my heart. I reach for his shirt, ready to start working his buttons, when he pulls slightly away. I frown, unsure of

what made him stop. Then I notice what he holds before me. During my distraction, he managed to retrieve what appears to be a ring.

My nose twitches as I study the rose gold band, the enormous pink pearl surrounded by two smaller diamonds. “I told you I’d get you pearls someday.”

“It’s beautiful.” Another twitch of my nose. Dorian takes my hand and slides the ring down my finger. It rests above the simple gold band he placed there during the final Blessing Ceremony. I meet Dorian’s eyes, and the tingle in my nose only intensifies. “I…I might actually sneeze on you.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” he says with a chuckle. Then he pulls my hand to his mouth and plants a kiss just above my ring. His smile turns mocking. “Your Highness.”

I swat him playfully. “Don’t you dare call me that.”

“What should I call you then? Temptress?” He presses his lips to mine. “Maisie?” Another kiss. “Mrs. Ariko?”

My stomach thrills. “I like the last one.”

He kisses me again, slower. “Maisie Ariko. My wife.”

“Yes,” I say.

We lose ourselves in each other’s lips. I melt into the feel of his mouth, his tongue, sensations I’ll never grow tired of, never take for granted. Every kiss between us is a gift. A blessing. Something wild and precious. More so because Dorian loved me even when he thought we’d never be able to kiss. And I loved him back. I would have continued to love him if I’d breathed my last breath and turned to seafoam that fateful sunrise last year. I would have merged with the sea and loved him as a wave. I would have loved him as a tide, caressing the beach that once felt the weight of his feet.

By the time we stop kissing, sounds from the theater downstairs have gone quiet, the last show of the night drawn to a close. Dorian lifts his face from mine, swollen lips twisted in a smirk. “Sooo,” he says drawing out the word, “about this twenty-four-hour wedding chapel you mentioned. Did you mean it?”

I take a deep breath and slowly nod.

His answering smile robs me of breath. Glittering light from the string of orbs hanging from my ceiling dances in his eyes like stars. “Good. Shall we then?”

My heart kicks up. I’m brimming with excitement, but I admit, there’s trepidation there too. Not fear though. Never fear. A lot changed this last

year, and marriage means more changes on the horizon. But I'm ready for that. For all of it. I know I want to experience all those changes with him. Whatever life brings us, we'll face it together. We've already faced each other's darkness. We've proven we'd die for each other.

But now, for a very long and maybe indefinite time, we get to live.

"Yes, Dorian," I say, grinning at the man I love. The man I'm ready to call my husband. "We shall."

End of Kiss of the Selkie. The next book in the ***Entangled with Fae*** series is ***A Taste of Poison***, a Snow White retelling featuring the mysterious Huntsman. After that, Briony Rose gets her love story in my retelling of Sleeping Beauty. You can also read about Ember and Franco (whom you met in the epilogue) in ***Heart of the Raven Prince***, a Cinderella retelling you won't want to miss! You can find all Entangled with Fae books here.

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Tessonja Odette is a fantasy author living in Seattle with her family, her pets, and ample amounts of chocolate. When she isn't writing, she's watching cat videos, petting dogs, having dance parties in the kitchen with her daughter, or pursuing her many creative hobbies. Read more about Tessonja at www.tessonjaodette.com